The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices
4
Mamecyoro
Illustration by
Mitsuya Fuji

Contents

1. Cover
2. Title Page
3. Copyright
4. Table of Contents
5. Begin Reading
6. Afterword
7. Yen Newsletter

Pagebreaks of the print version

Cover Page
i
ii
iii
iv
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12

13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44

45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76

77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108

109
110
111
112
113
114
115
116
117
118
119
120
121
122
123
124
125
126
127
128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140

141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
165
166

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4

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YEN ON
New York

Meet the characters of *The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices.*

Alexis

Esfia's second prince. Octavia's confidant and beloved little brother. Currently away on a mission.

Sirius

The crown prince of Esfia. Has a strained relationship with Octavia due to the heir dilemma.

Sil Burks

The main character of the BL novel *The Noble King* and Sirius's boyfriend.

Edgar

The king's partner and a former merchant. A (male) mother to Octavia.

Enoch Esfia

Esfia's current king. He seems to be *coddling* Edgar?!

Derek Nightfellow

Duke Nightfellow's son and Sirius's friend.

Klifford Alderton

Octavia's bodyguard. His past is shrouded in mystery. He forged an Adjutant-Sovereign pact with Octavia.

Octavia

A former high schooler (and *fujoshi*) who was reincarnated into the world of BL novel *The Noble King*. She's the princess of Esfia, fighting to thwart the arranged marriage in her future!

CONTENTS

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Begin Reading

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

47

“What? Is it really that strange for me to be here, Octavia?” My father’s tone was solemn yet high-and-mighty.

Then again, being Esfia’s supreme authority, he *literally was* high and mighty.

Only a minute ago, my maid Sasha informed me that my father was to come visit me without much warning. At the time, I’d been sprawled out on my canopy bed in a less-than-princess-like posture, poring over my diary. Panicking, I’d jumped out of my bed and hastily readied myself for my father’s arrival—

And now, there were three people in my room: me, my father, and Sasha, who maintained a reverent curtsy in the corner of the room.

My father in my room… Yup, definitely *nothing* amiss about that!

When was the last time my father visited my room anyway? I mean, yeah, ever since I woke up this morning, I had been dying to talk to somebody about the predicament I was in—but my father was the last person I expected to see!

I just assumed it would be Matilda, my chief handmaid, or someth—Aaaagh! Wait, hold up!

When my gaze shifted a little, I froze. On the skirt of my everyday dress, there was…an abnormal, bulging wrinkle! And it wasn’t on the front of the skirt. It was on the right rear side. And abnormally low!

Okay…my father can't see it from this angle. So no harm, no foul! But I still…ergh! I wanna smooth it out! But it's not like I can just fix my skirt right in front of my father…!

Too bad my father just *had* to come in the room the moment I opened Blackfeather. And that question he'd asked me was still hanging in the air.

I have to answer him…but regrettably…my wrinkle… I can't stop obsessing over my wrinkle!

I need to get out of this…

Eureka! I've got the perfect line!

"Why, no, Father. Do come in. I've been expecting you." I closed my fan and held it in my right hand. And in an act of wrinkle-smoothing subterfuge, I performed Esfia's supreme curtsy to my father. Since it held the meaning "I respect you with all my heart, and I will never defy you," it was optimum ass-kissing! Since it was dramatic, the greeting was reserved only for the king. In short, it was totally okay to use it with my father. If anything, it was to be expected!

With my legs crossed, I lowered myself, bowing my head quite low as I lifted both ends of my skirt in my hands. This was how ladies performed the gesture. With my body positioned this low to the ground, I could precisely and smoothly slide my fingers to where the wrinkle was, you see! Then, drawing upon the action of spreading my skirt fabric wide, I poured my full concentration into my fingertips. And I tugged with all my might to smooth that wrinkle, careful not to agitate my left hand, which had been treated with a healing salve and bandaged…

That oughtta do it! If nothing else, my skirt wrinkle is gone now! Phew. I can breathe again.

I stood, basking in the glow of my accomplishment, and lifted my head. And when my gaze met my father's, he heaved a sigh.

Huh? Did he see through my little badass wrinkle-smoothing curtsy ruse?

"Octavia."

"*Y-yes, Father?!*"—is how I was tempted to respond, but as a stammered response would be an admission of wrinkle-smoothing guilt, I opened Blackfeather, put on my poker face, and replied coolly, "Yes, Father?"

"First you give the crown to Leif, then you greet me with dutiful respect in the highest form of curtsy… I simply cannot fathom your thoughts."

Uh, Father, I don't think my thoughts could be any more transparent…

I was drawing a blank.

“Um…of what do you speak, Father? I cannot fathom your thoughts, either.”

Even if the princess sought out the king, the meaning would be the same—the highest curtsy was still the highest curtsy. Having said that, I guess it’s safe to assume my father didn’t notice the whole wrinkle-smoothing thing. Though from what he just said, it was now crystal clear that Uncle Dearest had delivered the crown to him…

“Well, I suppose neither of us can comprehend the other’s rationale… Shall we try bridging the gulf between us, then?” With that, my father leisurely sat in a chair.

And I took a seat directly across from him.

One day earlier, I’d safely escaped the underground Sky Chamber at the junior ball and made my way back home. Klifford had carried me in his arms from the tunnel to my bed. And when I woke, I was in my bedchamber at the castle! It was suddenly the next morning! And my wounded left hand had already been tended to! *Bam. Whoosh.* Done.

AAAGGGHHH!—that was me, wanting to wail in agony.

But I somehow pulled myself together and set out to ask somebody to catch me up on what had happened while I was asleep—only to find out that I was confined to my bedroom. Since I had been wounded, I was relieved of my daily tasks, too.

…And things had gotten quite extreme.

“Don’t set a foot outside! You’re only allowed in your personal quarters and your bedchamber. No contact nor communications with the outside world.”

I saw the castle doctor when my wounded hand needed treatment, but the only other person I was allowed to see and speak to freely was my handmaid Sasha.

And inevitably, even my bodyguard, Klifford—who usually got straight to work first thing in the morning—was nowhere to be seen.

Despite everything that had happened the day before, I wasn’t allowed even a sliver of information about it. It was already well past noon, and

even though I had been there—even though I'd witnessed what happened in the Sky Chamber—I was yet to be questioned about it.

How much longer is this gonna last? Somebody, tell me what's going on! C'mon, you can't blame me for complaining!

And it was finally my father, His Majesty the King, who came to hear me out. He gave my bandaged left hand a good, long look before breaking the ice.

"How is your wound?"

"Nothing life-threatening, Father. 'Tis but a scratch."

The castle doctor said if a healing salve was applied to it three times per day, it would heal completely in a short time. It wasn't going to get in the way of my daily tasks, either. Apparently, I had a fever, even though I really didn't feel like it, so I had to drink medicine for that, too. I was warned drowsiness was a side effect. I had taken the medicine after lunch, but I still wasn't feeling drowsy. And I doubted my fever could've been any higher than thirty-seven degrees Celsius. In my past life, I would have gone to school, and it would have broken by lunchtime—that's the extent of it.

"I was told your left hand was wounded during the raid last night."

"I inflicted it on myself…for a personal reason."

"So I've been told. That was rash of you, personal reasons aside. Don't you realize your bodyguard is in serious trouble because of what you did?"

Klifford's in trouble?!

"Er…why, pray tell? From the intelligence briefing, you should be well aware that Klifford was not even slightly at fault. He protected me, he fought the Adjutant, and he won. He is a man of merit."

"His behavior itself is indeed worthy of merit. However, Klifford Alderton allowed Esfia's only princess to be wounded in his presence. That failure cannot be overlooked."

W-well, duh, if you ignore the bigger picture, of course you'll see it that way!

"But I *commanded* Klifford not to impede my actions," I argued vehemently.

My father just shook his head. "I couldn't care less about technicalities, Octavia. You are Esfia's only princess. I will say it as many times as I have to—you were wounded on your bodyguard's watch. The result of that—the reality of that—is everything. I advise you to change bodyguards."

I gripped Blackfeather tightly.

Mmmrrrggg… I understand it on a logical level. I really do! But I can't back off now.

"Is that why I haven't seen Klifford since this morning? Change my bodyguard, you say? That decision is *mine* to make. And I have no intention of employing a new bodyguard. As far as I'm concerned, Klifford was not at fault." After that sassy retort, I observed my father's reaction.

And these were the words he sent right back at me: "Well…the one who pushed for the change originally was Sirius."

"But how do you feel, Father?"

"His actions last night were both flawed and meritorious. It all depends on which I choose to give precedence to."

Aha! I know what that means.

"And you choose to give precedence to his merit, yes?"

"I do. However, Octavia…" His emerald-green eyes, darker even than the eyes of my little brother, Alec, stared directly into mine. "You were wounded. That fact hasn't changed. Ordinarily, your bodyguard would be severely punished for a transgression of this nature. Don't forget that. You are a princess—we need no reason more than that."

"……"

Even though I was living as a princess in a kingdom with a class hierarchy, I couldn't help but revert to the teenager I was in my past life and think, *It's no big deal.* I wasn't making light of the situation. It's just…I was faintly cognizant of the fact that a wound like mine was of much greater consequence now than it would have been if I were a normal teen girl.

And because of that…I could vividly imagine what punishment might befall Klifford, even for a minor wound.

What's done was done. No amount of regret could change that. And even my little fever… It couldn't be taken lightly, either. Besides, there was a world of difference between doing what I did and not knowing what would happen…and knowing full well what would happen. The weight of my decision was crushing me.

"Father…I will take your words to heart." I closed Blackfeather and nodded.

"From your tone…I gather you're not afraid he'll be punished. But that man sure has some nerve. He didn't cooperate with Sirius's investigation."

"…?!" My eyes nearly bulged out of my face.

Investigation?! Why's he doing that? My brother is investigating Klifford? I could understand it if Klifford had been on the side of the intruders, but he *defeated* the intruders—he saved mine and Sil's lives, good sir!

I leaned toward my father. "Have the events of last night not been communicated accurately to you? Why must Klifford be investigated?"

"Let me put it another way. Sirius merely intended to get the simple facts out of him. But Klifford refused. Most obstinately. Octavia, I daresay that without your express permission, that man won't utter a single word."

K-Klifford! …Then again, he'd totally do that.

Bare his soul and divulge everything to my brother? Yeah, that would never happen. And I was grateful for that… But there was the matter of Sil—just how much should we disclose? I was still grateful for Klifford's silence…but because of it, the ground he was standing on was getting shakier and shakier…

"I take it no harm will come to him?"

"Not unless you wash your hands of him."

"Klifford is my bodyguard, and he always shall be."

My father chuckled softly. "Rest assured…Derek bent over backward to mediate. Both Leif and Derek corroborated the events of last night. Every single fact included. Your bodyguard is not under any suspicion. However…" My father's voice took on an ominous tone, and he continued, "Sirius is still quite angry."

Of course. He always gets angry when his beloved Sil is in danger!

"Lord Sil… How did he fare?"

"He's been asleep ever since. It's only because he's unharmed that Sirius's mood is currently stable."

"So he's under Brother's care."

That means Sil truly is safe for real now.

I pulled back a little and returned to my former seated position.

"Sirius is angry that Sil was a decoy."

Well, duh.

"I imagine he's also angry with me for taking Lord Sil to the junior ball…"

"He's angry with Derek for that, too. You're both guilty on that front."

Is it just me, or does my father look amused…? Maybe I'm just being paranoid.

"Understood, Father. I shall have a thorough discussion with my brother later."

"That would be for the best. For your role in all of this…I've had Sirius handle part of your and your bodyguard's punishment."

Methinks I heard something that cannot go ignored…

"My confinement… Was that by order of my brother?"

"Yes. Your bodyguard is currently under house arrest—the duration of your detentions is up to him."

Wh-what did you say?!

Klifford was under house arrest… From what my father had been saying, that much was easy enough to glean. But—

"Why was it not you—the king—but my brother who passed judgment?"

If I had to choose between my father and my brother, since I'd just stepped on a huge landmine called Sil, my father was just *kind of* easier to deal with right now!

"I made a promise to Sirius. A promise which he is now holding me to. I am in no place to refuse him. So if you wish to be free, Octavia, *you* must do something about Sirius."

"So…that's why you came all the way to my room to see me…"

It was a major bummer.

"As Sirius is the eldest prince, I am the only one who can overturn an order from him. And I doubt Sirius will make a fuss over the matter of this degree. Now, then—" My father's slightly more amiable than usual mood reverted to normal. I followed suit and assumed a solemn gaze. "Octavia. Is there anything you should tell me?"

Anything I should tell my father…

"Duke Nightfellow and Lord Derek told you every last detail that happened last night, did they not?" After all, I'd told Uncle Dearest everything. "Well, I, too, would like to tell you about last night."

I was there. It was really weird for me to be the only one who was exempt from all the…interrogating?…even well after I was awake. Of course, Uncle Dearest would never tamper with the story, but it's still wrong to leave everything completely to him!

But wait—

“You needn’t tell me. If you’re going to tell someone, it should be your brother.”

—my father shot me down.

“If that’s all you wanted to talk about, then this conversation is over.” He began to rise from his chair to hammer it home.

Now wait a gosh darn minute! For better or worse, this was the perfect opportunity to talk to my father face-to-face. And in my territory, to boot! Like *hell* I’m letting him get away!

“Please, Father, don’t go just yet. I don’t wish to talk—but I do have something to ask. Last night’s junior ball inspired a plethora of questions.”

“Oh?” My father’s bottom returned to the chair.

Phew!

“Well, I can’t guarantee I’ll answer your questions.”

What?!

“You mean you don’t wish to answer?”

“I’d rather not… But if I give you a limit—if you had to narrow down your numerous questions to just one, I’m curious to hear what you’d ask.”

“If I ask just one question, you will answer it, then?”

“Just one, yes.”

I nodded. “Very well. But I also have a request for you, Father. I don’t want your answer to contain even the slightest hint of falsehood.”

My father could not suppress a chuckle. “Fine. I will answer one question, and without falsehood.”

Sweet! But dang, just one question?

The crown… Nah, scratch that. I’m pretty sure he got it all right.

There was the Sky Chamber…the Adjutants Uncle Dearest and his men captured…King Eus and Queen Idéalia…

I was dying to ask about all those things, but if there was one question only my father would know the answer to—

“If you want answers…then shouldn’t you ask the first person your face disturbed?”

“You mean to say I should ask…His Majesty the King?”

Rust—whose face was identical to the mysterious young man—and the little exchange I’d had with him at the arbor in Paradise in the Sky briefly crossed my mind.

Was Rust telling the truth?

Does my father know Rust?

But I was allowed only one question. And neither answer would give me much information.

In that case, I'd make a couple tweaks and…

I voiced my question. "Whom does Rust Byrne resemble?"

Boom, baby!

That's what I really wanted to know most of all: Whom does Rust look like? If my father never met Rust, then he would answer as much. But if he *had* met Rust—

"Duke Rufus Kihlgren."

I was so freaked out that I inadvertently opened Blackfeather as far as it could go. And that was because my father was exuding an intensity he could not hide… My father was not a very expressive person. It's not that he lacked emotion. From my observations, he was just a king who kept his feelings in check.

But the man I saw before me now was the polar opposite of that.

"Kihlgren is deceased. Rust Byrne looks like my uncle…your great-uncle. The spitting image of him, when he was young. It was almost…as if he had come back from the dead."

The emotion spilling from him was very dark. So dark that it reminded me of the feeling I got from that shitty haunting memory of mine. It made me wonder if Duke Kihlgren was to my father what that mysterious young man was to me.

Duke Kihlgren… The day Alec left on his mission, he asked me if I had ever met anyone by that name. And he was exactly who my father said he was—our uncle and a former Duke of Nightfellow.

I think I remember Alec saying that Father called him Kihlgren when he gave him the mission… What does this all mean?

I knew my father was not lying. Even in a verbal agreement, he cared about keeping his word.

So…Rust resembles the late Duke Kihlgren.

In other words, Duke Kihlgren resembled that mysterious young man, too.

"There—I've answered your question, Octavia. I hope you find it useful."

My father got to his feet. Sasha took that as her cue to open the door to the hallway just as my father approached it. And his bodyguards, who were

waiting outside, bowed in unison at his arrival.

"……"

I belly flopped onto my bed.

After my father left, my first order of business was to tell Sasha to inform the appropriate staff member that I wanted to meet with my bodyguard, Klifford, during his house arrest. Matilda tried her best to make it happen—but the request was denied. Mine Princess Privilege hath been smote.

I could tell Sirius wasn't messing around.

So my next move was to inform my brother via messenger that I wished to see him. I decided to hang out in my bedchamber until I got a reply.

On my pillow lay an open diary and a pencil. I had five diaries in total. They were made of a sturdy plant-based leather, and the thick stacks of papers were tightly bound. My pencils were made of long, thin wooden sticks filled with graphite cores. Everything was newly made. I'd acquired all these goodies via a tip from my bookworm buddy and pen pal, Cissy.

I gripped the pencil in my right hand and got back to writing my diary entry. I was in the middle of jotting down everything that had happened at the junior ball—all the noteworthy things I'd seen and heard.

Naturally, my language of choice was Japanese. Since I was the only one who could read Japanese, it served me well as a secret code. I didn't have to worry a bit about intelligence leaks!

Okay, where'd I leave off…?

Let's see… So, going in order, I wrote about Sil's carriage almost crashing and Derek telling me about my brother's memory…so I was just about to write about Cissy's letters not reaching me.

Naturally, I was going to write about what happened after that, too.

I flipped through a number of pages before landing on a blank one and beginning a new entry. I wrote down the names *Rust* and *Duke Kihlgren* and connected them with an equal sign. Then I wrote down *the mysterious man*… And after a moment's thought, I wrote the names of my father and Alec beneath them. Then I wrote down *House Nightfellow* near Duke Kihlgren's name.

I guess it was kinda like a relationship chart?

If I want to do some detective work on Duke Kihlgren, visiting House Nightfellow would probably be my best shortcut. I just need to connect with Uncle Dearest and—ack, I need to lift this damn confinement first. I can't leave my room yet.

And I needed to do something about Klifford's house arrest, too. Unless I cleared those two hurdles, searching for a fake boyfriend was beyond a pipe dream! And good luck researching Esfia's history when I couldn't even go to the library. My meet-the-parents date would come before I knew it—

I paused mid-scribble.

Wait a minute—if I was in confinement until D-Day, wouldn't I be able to avoid introducing my fake boyfriend to my family at all? That might actually work. It might be a means of escaping Meet the Parents!

"No, no, stop that."

I shook my head vigorously. At a glance, it seemed like a great idea, but what if I went with it and just chilled without making any preparations… and my read on the situation was way off? The tragic notion of facing my meet-the-parents date alone would become a grim reality!

The consequences of losing that gamble were beyond hellish…

I had to break out of my situation by any means necessary! And unfortunately, that meant clearing the biggest hurdle of all: my brother. I should probably jot down some pointers to guide me moving forward.

Mmmrrrggg…… Mmmrrrggg……

I groaned, poking at my diary, until I felt my eyelids growing heavier and heavier. I stifled a yawn. Was the medicine's side effect kicking in? In my heart of hearts, I wanted to psych myself up and stay awake. But something the doctor had said stopped me in my tracks: *"If you're feeling sleepy, go to sleep. Don't force yourself to stay awake. Your fever will go down faster that way."*

It was time to nip my "it's no big deal" attitude in the bud.

I closed my diary, gathered my pencils, and set them on my nightstand. I popped my head out of the bedchamber, told Sasha to wake me if somebody came to see me, and belly flopped back onto my bed.

Then I closed my eyes.

"……"

But I couldn't sleep.

As I lay there, tossing and turning with my eyes open, I caught sight of white flowers. The Lieche orchids I'd put by my pillow the day before the junior ball had lost their luster. When Sasha noticed this and suggested switching them out for fresh ones, I had turned her down.

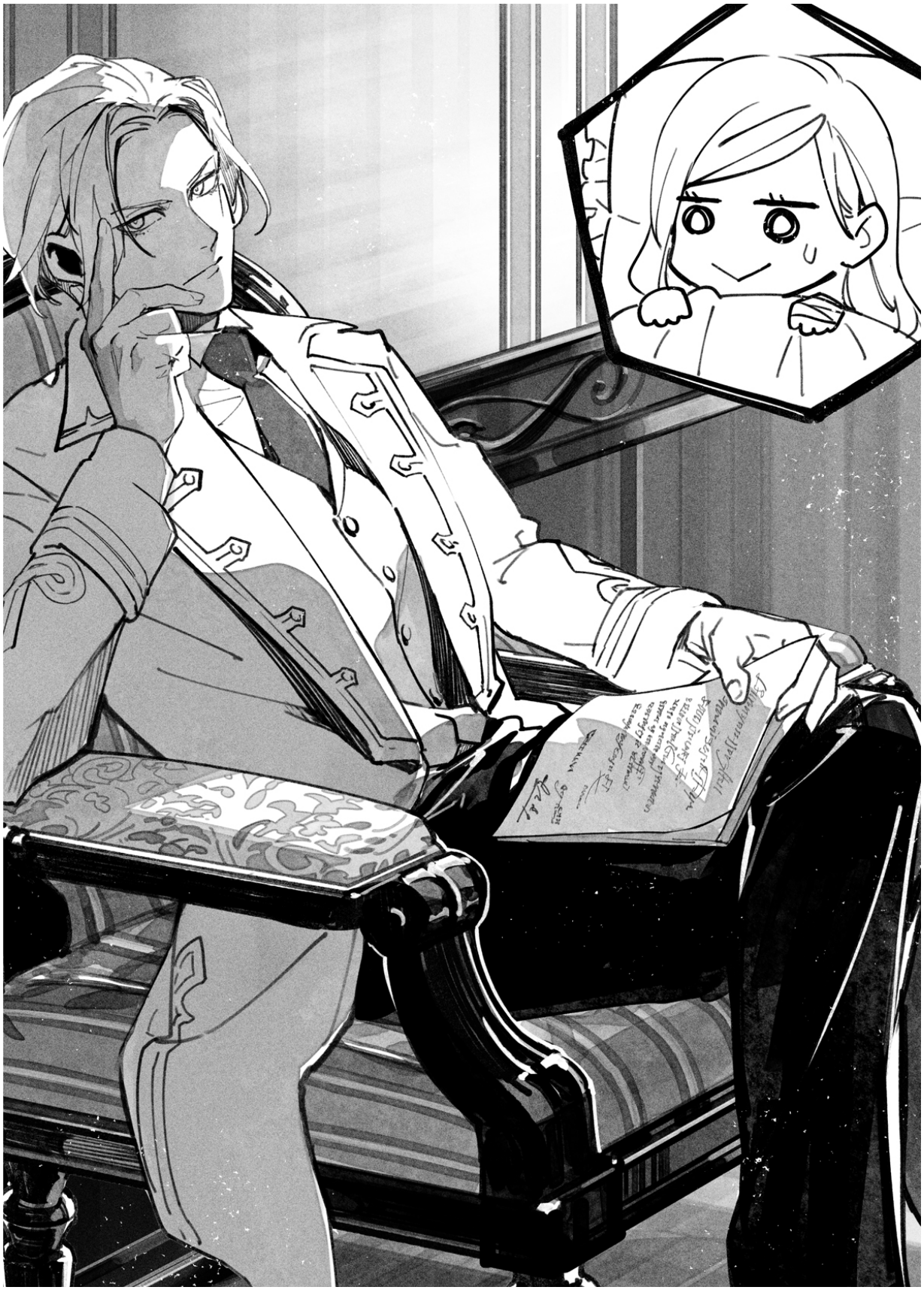
I wasn't the superstitious type, but…those were the flowers that Klifford had first put into my hair. In place of the Lieche orchids I'd left behind at Paradise in the Sky, I just had the feeling I needed to keep them here as they were.

And as the faint fragrance of the Lieche orchids embraced me, I closed my eyes once again.

"Nnn…"

I heard the sound of flipping pages. Was somebody reading a book…? Sasha?

I rubbed my eyes. I felt sleepy but refreshed. You should always listen to your doctor's opinion.



Is my fever completely gone now? Are Lieche orchids a natural sleep aid? I not only slept like a baby—I didn't even dream!

In a half daze, I rolled over in bed…and what I saw jolted me fully awake.

I saw the unthinkable.

A pair of crossed, long legs.

I moved my gaze upward.

And there he was, his elbow on an armrest of the chair and his chin in his hand, sitting and waiting by the bed.

Yup. He sure makes a pretty picture.

I think there was a special autographed original illustration like this… It was only available by lottery, and even though I'd made my sister enter it, too, I still couldn't get my hands on it. And when I was all bummed out at school about it, Kazune had twisted the knife even further by calling me cringe. (But then Kazune asked me out to all-you-can-eat cake after that, true tsundere that she is.)

"……"

"……"

My eyes locked with his aquamarines. He was looking down at me. His perfect face was framed by silvery hair.

And his beautiful voice said, "Good morning, Octavia."

"G-good morning, Brother."

It was *The Noble King's* protagonist opposite Sil: the prince. He was also my big brother, Sirius. And he was sitting right there in my room.

W-wait a minute… Am I dreaming here?

48

"You sure slept hard."

Hardly changing his cross-legged, chin-propped seated position, my brother looked up from the documents on his lap—that was probably the sound of fluttering papers I had heard in my half-asleep daze—and spoke again. It would seem that my request to see my brother had resulted in him coming here to see me personally.

I know I said the same thing about my father, but there was *totally nothing amiss* about my big brother being in my room. And even though I had returned his greeting, I still couldn't help but wonder if this really was a dream…

I sat up in bed. My eyes carefully scanned the room. The wilted Lieche orchids were emitting the same faint fragrance as when I was falling asleep. My diary and pencils were still on my nightstand, and Sasha was stationed in a corner of the room.

Lastly, my eyes settled on one fixed point. There was the special original illustration from my past life—but in three dimensions. It was my big brother.

This is real!

I sat straight as a pin. I never imagined he would come visit me in my bedchamber!

"Dear Brother…you could have woken me."

"Not after what you just went through. I also heard you had a fever. You must be tired—I didn't have the heart to wake you. Feeling better?" His eyes wandered to my bandaged left hand.

"I appreciate your concern, but my wound will heal in a few days' time. And the little nap I just had seems to have brought my fever down."

"Glad to hear that. It was worth demanding that your maid let me stay until you woke."

Aha. I can imagine what happened… I looked at Sasha, and she sheepishly nodded to me. *Yup. Nobody can go against an order from the prince. She couldn't help it— Wait a minute, look at me! I'm talking to my brother like things are cool between us!*

From the way my father spoke about Sirius, I imagined he would be blowing his top…but it was exactly the opposite. Like, he wasn't even being confrontational.

"I did tell your maid she could leave us…"

"Well, I was asleep, and even though you are my brother, you aren't supposed to just barge into a lady's bedchamber. My maid was surely just following the rules for my sake."

Even if these were ordinary circumstances, this was my bedchamber. Therefore, my brother's bodyguards were not in here—they were probably on standby in the next room—so if Sasha left the room, that would leave me

alone with my brother. Still, that's just imagining the worst-case scenario. It's not like anything bad would happen anyway!

"Following the rules… Yes, I see. There was that one time two royals were left alone to reconcile their differences and wound up at each other's throats."

"Er…at each other's throats, you say?" I frowned slightly. If you flip through the royal family's history, you'll find a lot of mess… Sometimes heinous acts, too. However. "But that would never happen to you and me, dear Brother." I would laugh it off—but that's unladylike, so I smiled coquettishly instead. I didn't care that we didn't get along. Worrying is a fool's errand! You can quote me on that!

"Yes…I suppose you're right." My brother's eyes narrowed for a moment, then he removed his elbow from the armrest and stood. He handed me the papers he was holding. "These were given to me earlier. I looked over them while I was waiting for you to wake up. It's a full briefing of everything that transpired during the raid at Countess Reddington's junior ball."

"Do…you want me to read them?"

"Read them in bed if you wish. You are wounded. Stay in whatever position is most comfortable. But I ask that you excuse your maid—I anticipate our conversation will be quite complicated."

I decided to take him up on his kind offer to read in bed. "Understood… Sasha?" I called her to me.

"Your Highness…" There was a hint of apprehension in her voice.

I smiled at her and said, "Don't worry, you may leave us. Once I've finished speaking with my brother, I would love a light meal and some tea."

"As you wish, my lady." And with a curtsy that was a paragon of handmaid excellence, Sasha left the room.

Sirius sat back down and recrossed his legs. As I felt his eyes bear into me, I took the papers in both hands and read over the Esfian script line by line.

This doesn't feel official… It has a "scribbled hastily to get the important facts across" vibe to it.

The report started with Sil's carriage accident, then it documented in great detail the raid in the garden and everything that had happened in the Sky Chamber in chronological order.

Some of it was news to me. Sil had been knocked out by a drug given to him by the Adjutant leader. *Aha! And that redhead who danced with me at the junior ball and who called Sil Burksie has a name! It's Steyn.* His name was on the list of informants.

So Sil was drugged… There wasn't anything like Sil getting drugged and turning into Super Sil in the source material, though… I wished the report included details about the conversation Sil had had with the Adjutant…but sadly, there were none.

However…

"My Sovereign… Why…?"

Those were the words that Sil (in his right mind?) had murmured just when it looked like he was freed from his trance.

If Sil was an Adjutant—I think that would check out. That would explain the strength he exhibited when he was in that trance…

The only hitch was, if he was an Adjutant, wouldn't that mean the Adjutant who was after him was his kinsman? I would love to ask the leader-Adjutant more questions about that, but the report said nothing of the captured traitors or how their investigations were going. Not a single line about it—which meant they were probably right in the middle of the investigation.

And there was one more thing…

"Your Majesty… My Sovereign."

It looked like Sil was reacting to me wearing Lieche orchids in my hair.

I thought back to what happened in the Sky Chamber. If he thought I was someone else…then was "Your Majesty" Queen Idéalia? Interpreted simply, that would mean Sil was Queen Idéalia's Adjutant.

But Sil and Idéalia lived in completely different eras… So did Sil have memories of his past life or something?

I was starting to drown in my sea of thoughts. I just continued reading through the report, flipping the pages to the back of the stack as I went. And then I returned to a page of interest.

As if he had been calculating the right moment, my brother finally spoke, his voice echoing through the room. "Any discrepancies?"

I looked up from the report. Then I met his eyes and shook my head. "No. Everything here is correct."

There weren’t any bogus falsifications—at the very least, all the events I had experienced were written truthfully. Even Klifford’s brave exploits.

Incidentally, the informant who’d recorded everything that happened after I entered the Sky Chamber was Derek. When Uncle Dearest arrived on the scene, he took over with his testimony. And of course, not only did he detail the discovery of the crown, but the capture of the traitors and all the strategizing that had taken place before and during the junior ball. He even wrote about Lady Rosa’s involvement.

He wrote that Rust was working for Rosa and that he had guided us to the Sky Chamber. The report stated that Rust had known the way by coincidence.

……That wording is misleading. It might even be entirely untrue.

“In that case,” Sirius said, “I have suspicions regarding your actions.”

I gulped.

Wh-what could it be? I mean, which actions? There are so many likely candidates. Knowing my brother, he’s probably wondering why I went to the junior ball with Sil to begin with.

“I’m talking about what you did in front of Sil.”

Oh, that?!

The thing I did when Super Sil was in his trance was written in the report in perfect detail. It was mostly from Derek’s testimony. Sil’s side of the story wasn’t in the report, though.

“Brother…has Lord Sil awakened yet?”

“He woke briefly, two hours ago. He’s asleep now.”

“Oh! I’m glad to hear it…”

He’s awake—that’s good news! Two hours ago… Wait a minute, what time is it now? We had exchanged good mornings, but that wasn’t necessarily reliable…

My bedchamber had a large glass window. On clear days, the sun shone through it, making the room ideal for naps! But it was shuttered at the moment. They always shuttered it at sundown. All the candles in my room were lit, too. It must be night…

“Lord Sil… What did he say about everything that transpired?”

“His carriage crashed on the way to the junior ball—then he happened to cross paths with you and rode in your carriage the rest of the way to Paradise in the Sky. During the ball, Duke Nightfellow approached him and

asked him to be a decoy to lure the intruders. So he went to the Sky Chamber, but he was injected with something and lost consciousness. That's as far as Sil's memory goes."

So he has no memory of when he was Super Sil… Huh…

"According to the report, Sil was not in his right mind when he was in the Sky Chamber. But you dispelled his madness. When you cut your left hand—when he came in contact with your blood—Sil became docile…" His eyes and tone were piercing. "Why did you do that?"

Er… How should I answer that?

In the light novels, this all would have happened much further along in the story, where I could have developed a theory by witnessing all the stuff that happened between Sil and Sirius…!

The fact that Sil (maybe) turned back to normal thanks to royal blood was in a sort of "All will be revealed in the next volume!" state of limbo.

What's more, the source of Sil's anxieties—his unknown birth origins—was something he hadn't revealed to Sirius yet.

And the icing on the cake: Suspicions of Sil's connection to the Adjutants had only just come to the surface.

As I sat there, stiff and silent, Sirius questioned me further. "Octavia. How were you able to rein in Sil? Is there…something you know that I don't?"

He would not drop the interrogation. From the look in his piercing aquamarine eyes, I could tell he would not let me evade the question.

A fleeting thought entered my brain: *Maybe I should just tell him everything?*

Maybe it was because I had finally somewhat managed to face that haunting memory of mine.

Okay, so what if I did *tell him everything?*

Run the simulation!

"My dear Brother, the truth is, this is my second life… I have memories from my first life in Japan, a world not in this realm. Also, this world was based off a BL light novel series I used to read—that's a man-on-man romance genre. You and Lord Sil were the main characters! That is how I

am privy to all sorts of secrets! Because I was an avid reader! That's how I woke Lord Sil from his trance—the source material showed me how!"

"*Gasp!* So that's how you did it…!"

"Oh, good. You understand me, don't you…?!"

Right… As if that would happen!

I had to burst my own bubble there. But a simple part of me really did wish everything could go down that way!

But wishing aside, best-case scenario, I'd probably be declared mad and locked up somewhere for treatment. That's how it usually goes…

Esfia is familiar with the concept of past lives. But actually saying in earnest that you remember your past life? That's about the same level of crazy it would be to say so in modern-day Japan. I mean, we have those machines in the occult section of shops that are like, *The secrets of your past life revealed!* And you get a reading on a dare and you're like, "*Eeew, I was a bug in my past life? I wasn't even a human!*" and then your friend's like, "*Ooh, I was a human! A circus performer in Europe, apparently!*" and you guys have a good laugh over it—something like that would totally be a thing you'd do.

But if you were seriously like, "*So, um, yeah…I was born in another universe in another era to another class and I lived my life doing this, that, and the other, and then I died,*" I think you'd *maybe* kinda freak everyone out!

People only believe the whole past life thing *because* they take it with a grain of salt.

Even if you were telling the truth, there's no way to prove it to anybody else. Besides, if I told somebody I remembered my past life, it would be preferable if that life took place in Esfia. At least it could all be explained completely within the rules of this world.

But if I told them I was from another world—from a country named Japan on planet Earth—and that their world was created based off a BL light novel series that teen girls loved to read… Well, that goes against their whole creation story, doesn't it?! Their faces would twist in anger, and they'd accuse me of blasphemy against the Sky God…and that's the best-case scenario. I'm sure it would ignite a violent uprising from some of Esfia's population.

Nobody would believe me—that was a given. I'd just be grateful if Sirius was willing to hear me out.

Instead of telling Sirius the truth—"*I read the light novels in my past life, so I have a general idea of how events are going to unfold*"—I should just put on a reverent face and say: "*The Sky God hath blessed me with the gift of prophecy!*" Now that—*that* was something he'd be a lot more likely to believe.

Having said all that, what if I told him about my past life memories…and that was enough to get him to believe me fully? Now *that* scared me more.

Then *I'd* have a hard time believing *him*… I'd be like, *Aha. He's just humoring me by pretending to believe me.*

And even if he did believe me—I'd need to take some crucial steps first. I'd have to be ready to face whatever came my way.

I wanted him to trust me, but I still wanted him to have a healthy level of paranoia… I mean, even if I were in a position to confess everything to him, I really don't think he'd believe me.

Anyway, I think we've established that confessing my secret to him would be incredibly dangerous. Because if I messed it up, there'd be no coming back from that! If I were to try something like that, I would have to tread very carefully.

So. How can I explain to my brother how I was able to break Sil free from his trance without telling him my secret? I definitely don't get the sense I can weasel my way out of answering him, but… C-can I just say it was a lucky guess? I'm just spitballing here—

This is hard. Sirius would be like, "*A lucky guess? Why cut yourself, though?*" What I did was so not the sort of thing a person would do on a whim.

And as for Sil's unknown birth origins… That was something Sirius should hear about from him, not me.

"Octavia," my brother prompted me.

Urk…I have to say something. Maybe instead of truthfully telling him about my past life, I should go the sucking up to the Sky God route? Be like, "It was a divine prophecy from the Sky!"

But no. I didn't want to lie to him. If I could tell him the truth but only within an acceptable range—

"In time…all will become clear to you."

Once we caught up to where the light novels left off, Sil would open up to Sirius about his unknown birth. Then, between that and the junior ball raid, Sirius should be able to piece a lot of the puzzle together himself. Then he and Sil could work together to solve the mysteries of his trance state… That would be the dream scenario!

“There is nothing I can tell you, Brother, aside from that.” And since I wasn’t lying, I was able to look him dead in the eye as I said it.

“All right… I understand.” Sirius closed his eyes. Then, with a long exhale, he opened his eyes and continued, “You may have nothing more to say, but I do. It’s about your bodyguard.”

“You want to talk about Klifford?” *Klifford’s come up in conversation! What a godsend! I can run with this and get him to lift Klifford’s house arrest!* “Yes, Father told me that *some people* question Klifford’s loyalty, since I was wounded.”

“Did he also tell you…that those *some people* are me?”

“Yes, Brother. Won’t you consider lifting Klifford’s house arrest? He protected not only me but Lord Sil from the Adjutant. He should be released.”

“Protected you both? But *you* are the one he has sworn to protect. When Sil…lost his mind and turned his sword on you…your bodyguard was ready to kill him. Can you deny that?”

Kill… Yeah, I can’t deny any part of that.

But at first, Klifford attempted to eliminate Super Sil because he was in a trance. It was a matter of risk management.

“But that was only because, as you said, Lord Sil turned his sword on me. Had Klifford not been there, Sil’s sword would have struck me.”

“So are you saying that Sil should be executed for the attempted murder of Esfia’s princess? You were the victim. If you gave the word, it would happen. What’s your answer?”

“I would do nothing of the sort. The traitors did something to Lord Sil—that’s why he acted that way. I want to settle the matter peacefully.”

Especially seeing as how I know a lot about what Sil’s going through (within the confines of the source material).

“So you’re saying, in exchange for you pardoning Sil and settling the matter internally, you want me to release your bodyguard?”

I blinked rapidly a few times.

Wh-what a good idea!

Why didn't I think of that?! Maybe I can just roll with it?

It was a wicked way of doing things, but why *couldn't* I just make an exchange?!

"That might be for the best, yes."

"You…are an awfully staunch defender of Klifford Alderton, aren't you?"

"None of my bodyguards have lasted long—you know this yourself, Brother. And yet Klifford has served me dutifully for three whole months now. He's a priceless talent."

Because he hasn't gotten a boyfriend and ditched me! This part's key!

"Talented enough that I just might go through your chief lady-in-waiting first thing and request an interview with Klifford Alderton…" At first, it appeared to be a snide quip…but there was more. "…Even if he was the lead suspect for a heinous act?"

……Klifford's a suspect?

"Octavia. You met up with Sil because you happened upon his runaway carriage, right? Then you rescued him and took him the rest of the way to the junior ball with you."

"Yes…exactly."

"We determined that Sil's carriage *accident* was an act of sabotage in three ways. The first was the carriage itself, the second was the driver, and the third was his hired bodyguard. We found this bodyguard and forced him to confess. The carriage had been ingeniously tampered with, and the driver had been drugged, and this man was hired as insurance to make certain that Sil's carriage would lose control. However…this man didn't know who his employer was or what they looked like."

So the runaway carriage was a carefully orchestrated act of sabotage… But something doesn't add up. It's this "employer" person.

The raid at the junior ball was two-pronged. Half of it was the anti-royalists targeting me. The other half was the traitors targeting Sil. The latter lured Sil to the junior ball with potential information about his birth parents. That much was also written in the report I had just read.

If that was their plan…why would they need to sabotage Sil's carriage before he even got to the junior ball? If anything, they needed him to get to Paradise in the Sky to carry out their plan, right? So that means, maybe the people who sabotaged Sil's carriage were different from the traitors at the Sky Chamber?

"We are currently searching for the person who drugged Sil's driver. And as for the carriage saboteur—Klifford Alderton is our lead suspect."

"Hmm?!"

WWWHHHAAA—?!

I was so shocked that my brain almost stopped working.

No, brain—now's not a good time!

"The carriage Sil used was parked on the castle grounds the day before the junior ball and the day before that. The carriage was checked two days before the junior ball, and everything was in good order. Meaning it must have been tampered with the day before the junior ball. And that night, a witness saw a man resembling your bodyguard lurking near the carriage for quite some time. It was the only suspicious entry and exit that night."

"But how credible is this witness? And you said 'resembling,' didn't you? Bodyguards all wear the same uniform. There's no guarantee it was Kliff—"

"There's no guarantee it *wasn't*. We cannot turn a blind eye on this matter—not when there's a testimony. Are you fine with letting a suspect loose? Well, I'm not. At the very least, I must put him under observation until his name is cleared."

Officially, Klifford was under house arrest for letting me get wounded… but this was Sirius's real reason!

"Brother…I take it this was your decision."

"Father has given me free rein on this. I am under no obligation to report everything to him. This includes your bodyguard being my lead suspect." Sirius leisurely recrossed his legs. "If Klifford Alderton was the one who tampered with the carriage, can't you just picture what that means? It means your bodyguard collaborated either with the traitors or with someone else to harm Sil. Your carriage intercepting his when it lost control was a miscalculation on his part. But he had no need to panic, because of the raid planned at the junior ball. Then, when he realized the raid had failed, he

betrayed the traitors. What if that was why he defeated the Adjutant—to make a show that he was on your side?”

“If Klifford was a traitor… If he was acquainted with those Adjutants, something would have felt off. Neither myself, Derek, Duke Nightfellow, nor his aid Steyn noticed anything amiss.”

“If he was a secret collaborator, he wouldn’t need to be acquainted with them. It’s only natural that none of you would have felt anything was amiss. Additionally, while the mission of harming Sil might have been the same, Klifford Alderton might have had his own unique motive in doing so.”

So he’s saying that would make Sil’s carriage sabotage make sense in spite of the traitors’ plot to lure Sil to the junior ball?

—If Klifford was one of the traitors, that is.

“But you just imagined that entire scenario yourself, Brother!”

“Yes, that’s right.” He nodded crisply, not even attempting to deny it. “Isn’t *that* all the more reason we should make sure it’s only my imagination? Especially when the suspicion of your bodyguard was the starting point of all of this?”

“Brother—my bodyguard is under suspicion due to what can only be described as trumped-up accusations. Of that I am well aware. However—” *If I’m gonna make one thing clear, it’s this!* “Klifford did *not* sabotage Lord Sil’s carriage. That’s a bogus charge.”

I mean, let’s say for the sake of argument that theoretically—*theoretically*, Klifford did sabotage Sil’s carriage. He wouldn’t be so stupid as to get spotted doing it! C’mon, *Klifford*?! That *OP character*?! Also, he wouldn’t fail! He’s the type of mastermind who’d carry out his plan quietly and with precision! I mean, it would hurt my case if he did for real! Actually, it would hurt more than just my case—but still!

“If you choose to blindly trust your bodyguard, that is no concern of mine.”

Grr! That’s the face of a man who definitely thinks Klifford’s guilty!

And when the face of that man is so perfectly gorgeous, it only twists the knife harder! C’mon, why’d you have to ruin that beautiful autographed illustration I’d coveted so badly…?

I wanted to bite my handkerchief and scream. *I’m losing it! No…I’m calm… Very calm… Breathe in…breathe out…*

…..…Ummm— Ooh! The deep breathing worked! I almost let my brother get to me, but I just realized we're forgetting something vital! The man himself! He's completely left out what the accused—Klifford—had to say in his defense!

I defiantly looked up at Sirius. "Pray tell—what did Klifford have to say about the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Er…nothing?"

"He wouldn't answer any questions. He neither denied nor confirmed anything."

According to my father, Klifford refused to answer any questions regarding the junior ball without my permission—was he doing the same for my brother's investigation?

Then I must see Klifford by any means necessary!

"Well then, I will question him, Brother."

"*You*…will question him?"

"Klifford will answer me truthfully." *That he's innocent!* "Brother, give me permission to visit Klifford."

Sirius fell into a thoughtful silence.

One more push!

"I shall not insist on going alone, either. It would be under your supervision."

My eyes met with Sirius's faintly disgruntled ones. He pressed me. "You really don't mind if I'm there?"

"Of course I don't mind. In fact, I sincerely request that you accompany me, Brother."

If Sirius hears Klifford's confession directly, he just might have a change of heart!

I had answered promptly and with confidence. But my brother's answer did not come… Only silence stretched between the two of us.

Wh-what's this strange tension I feel in the air…? A d-distraction! That's what we need! My eyes landed on the documents in my hand. *Maybe I should leave these on my nightstand. On top of my diary.* With a gesture of *—Agh! My pencil that was already hanging off my nightstand is about to fall off!*—I quickly left the documents on my nightstand and reached out with my right hand to the pencil…

Epic catch!

“……”

Epic fail.

Well, I did manage to set down the documents and catch my pencil—but in exchange, I pushed my diary off the nightstand! It succumbed to the law of gravity and fell. On its way down, the diary’s pages flapped open, and it *splat*ted on the carpet… My poor left hand didn’t have the control I was accustomed to.

I’ve gotta pick it up…

But before I could, my brother stood from his chair, approached the fallen diary, and crouched beside it. He grabbed it by the back cover and picked it up off the ground, flipped it over—and his aquamarine eyes widened.

Sirius was probably looking at a page full of Japanese characters. Nobody but me could read it, yet he just kept staring at it.

“Brother…?”

Sirius’s fingertips touched one of the Japanese words I had written on the page.

“This brings back memories…” His gaze was soft and peaceful. “When we were children…you wrote in this script often and—” He suddenly cut off midsentence. “Nng!” His face twisted with pain, Sirius pressed his fingers to his temples and shook his head.

“Brother?!” I jumped out of my bed and ran over to him.

“It’s nothing…just a little headache.”

He removed his hand from his temples and closed the diary in his other hand. Then he handed it to me, and I took it…

“Are you feeling ill, Brother?”

“No. I’m fine.”

You don’t exactly look fine… Wait just a minute here—

I thought my brother had no memories of us as children. At least, that’s what Derek said. But didn’t Sirius just say…?

A memory struck me—of a time when I was a little girl and Esfia’s language still eluded me. I used to scribble silently in Japanese in my diary while Sirius tried to get me to open up to him.

Does Sirius…remember that? Or more like, he was about to remember it…then he got a headache?

Sirius suddenly sighed. “Very well.”

“Huh?”

For a second, I didn’t realize what it was he was approving of.

“Your bodyguard. If I can be present, I’ll permit you to see him.”

49

Okay, we’d better get going before Sirius changes his mind!

I arranged to have my light meal and tea after I returned. I summoned Sasha to give me a quick touch-up, which resulted in an everyday dress and Blackfeather in hand.

And now I make my grand departure! To Klifford!

Sasha bid me farewell as Sirius and his two bodyguards, who were on standby in the hallway, escorted me through the dark castle. Sirius and I walked side by side, with one guard positioned diagonally to the back of each of us, but under the cover of Blackfeather, I couldn’t stop my eyes from nervously darting to and fro.

So this is what it’s like…

Ordinarily, I’d be in my nightgown and in bed by now. I wasn’t permitted to leave my room until morning… Whether I was asleep or not was another matter entirely. I would often spend my nights sprawled out on my bed reading books I borrowed from the library or books that Cissy translated for me, you see! It was also quite common for me to lose myself in those books all the way until sunrise.

In short, even though I may have spent my nights up in bed reading, I never got up and walked around. So the castle felt entirely new to me. In a way, this might just be a significant experience for me. Even if late-night walks on the castle grounds weren’t prohibited, they still felt quite different than walks in the daylight.

The royal balls held at the castle once per year were occasions on which I was allowed to walk freely about the grounds this late at night. But being loud and lively all the way until morning, the festive atmosphere changed the entire mood of the castle anyway.

The mood of the castle grounds in the middle of an ordinary night—pure elegance. The hall we were walking down was exclusively for use by the

nobility, just like the grand corridor. Though they were usually shut during royal balls, the shutters on the windows facing the inside of the castle were open. This was so people could gaze at the moonlit vistas outside. It was a little world of fantasy and tranquility!

Or put less charitably, it looked haunted.

As I walked down the hall thinking about these things, I saw one of the castle gardens outside the window. It was the spot where Klifford and I had stopped after I'd seen Alec off on his mission. The garden was a bit snug but a real hidden gem. It was my secret, favorite place and heavily in bloom with Lieche orchids, as always.

Gee…I wish I could go there again.

With the moonlight complementing it so beautifully, I would have loved to just duck in there for a midnight walk. But now wasn't the time—

"Urk!" I stopped in my tracks.

"Octavia?" Sirius asked.

I quickly shook my head. "It's nothing."

I looked out the window again and… *Oh, it's gone now.*

When I was looking over the garden as we were walking past, there, among the Lieche orchids, I saw a human silhouette! That's why I'd cringed in terror. I thought it was a ghost. But a closer look revealed it to be…none other than Edgar!

Edgar was my father's partner and the (male) mother who had raised me. And he was unusually light on his feet, so maybe he got the urge to sneak out on a little moonlit walk like me. Since he used to be a merchant, he and I were a little more closely connected than others by our shared peasant background. That's probably why our taste in gardens was the same.

But I couldn't see Edgar anymore. Maybe he had moved.

Or maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me…?

"Lord Edgar…"

I think that was him?

"What about him?" Sirius looked back at me dubiously.

If I mentioned that Edgar was in the garden, I got the nagging sense it might release a deluge of questions. Edgar wasn't in the habit of slipping out at night to go on a walk. Having said that, it did seem feasible that he just wanted to get some fresh air. And my father would have given him permission to do so.

However! To speak up about it now would be poking a hornet's nest. Full disclosure, I only got a glance of him. I wasn't 100 percent confident it was Edgar.

So I kept it to myself!

"It's…nothing, Brother."

"……" Sirius frowned at me.

Ugh. This silence is suffocating me.

So I casually fluttered Blackfeather to camouflage my embarrassment as I assessed my brother's mood. And while the deep crease between his eyebrows was still present, his unrivaled handsome face was showing no signs of strain.

I thought back to the way he'd looked when he picked up my diary. Maybe that was just temporary… When he left my bedchamber, I inquired about his health once again, but I received the expected "I'm fine," and I wasn't able to get another word in edgewise—which brings us to this moment.

"……"

"……"

Um, a little help here?! Somebody do something about this painful silence!

But lo! My savior hath arrived at last! With the sound of hard-heeled bootsteps.

"Prince Sirius!"

"Yes, Hugh?" There was a hint of "*What do* you *want?*" in his voice as Sirius turned around to face Hugh Roberts, the black-haired knight running toward us.

Hugh Roberts was one of Sirius's bodyguards. Klifford was my only bodyguard, but my father, Sirius, and Alec all had multiple bodyguards in their service. As did Edgar, of course… I guess it would be technically more correct to say "*everybody but me.*"

Incidentally, the reason I—the princess—only had one bodyguard was because of some backlash that happened in the past when princesses used to have many bodyguards. Apparently, for a little while there, she had even

more bodyguards than the king. Way too extreme. Let princesses have support systems, people!

But never mind that; back to Hugh. If you're wondering how I knew the full name of one of my brother's bodyguards, it's because unlike mine, Sirius's bodyguards didn't play musical chairs, so it was inevitable that I would remember them. Additionally—in *The Noble King* light novels, Hugh was one of Sirius's most trusted bodyguards, so he was in the story a lot! You could say he was Sirius's confidant. Both a vassal and a friend—that dynamic.

And he was one of the regular characters in the source material. I guess he was a main-adjacent character. He especially had a lot of appearances in Volume 1. Hugh Roberts's role in the story was to develop feelings for Sil as he watched the young man's romance with Sirius bloom. But he kept his love a secret, pledged his loyalty to Sirius, and became a sort of matchmaking confidant for the two—always a friend when they needed him.

He had a similar role to Sister-dearest—Octavia. And in the books, Octavia loved Hugh like a brother. Meanwhile, he didn't seem very happy whenever Sirius doted on her too much.

The fans had their theory. *Maybe Sister-dearest is in love with Hugh? Even though it's a BL, is Octavia supposed to heal Hugh's broken heart by winding up with him?* We all weighed the pros and cons of how that would play out.

Incidentally, I was against that fan theory. It's not that I hated Sister-dearest; I just didn't want a stud like Hugh to wind up with a girl! Please, let his love remain unrequited! Let him admire Sil from afar! …Okay, I wouldn't take it that far, but I just didn't like the idea of him having a change of heart within the actual story—that's the kind of fan I was!

So…what's my relationship with Hugh now?

Tut. Given that my relationship with Sirius is different from the source material, I think you can guess!

As he's ride-or-die Team Sirius *and* Team Sil, and I stand in their way, I'm sure he thinks I'm a royal pain in the ass!

But sometimes, I have a fleeting thought. Maybe—at a super-low probability—just like Derek and I had a surprisingly good rapport once we actually talked, maybe I'm just unfairly prejudiced against him…

His exact age was a mystery, but he was a bachelor in his early twenties. And though he was a lower-born nobleman, he was selected to be Sirius's bodyguard. In the source material, he was painted as a kind big brother sort of character.

His eyes were the same shade of black as his short hair. He was one of Sirius's top two closest and most trusted vassals. He was often entrusted with other tasks besides security. The other thing that left a lasting impression about him from the books was…the tassel on his sword, I guess. When he was first assigned as Sirius's bodyguard, Hugh was gifted a tassel of golden threads. It was his prized possession, and Sil was also quite taken with it…

Anyway, that's Hugh. And at present, he was informing Sirius of something…with an anything-but-tranquil expression on his face. I could hear his voice loud and clear, but I couldn't understand a word of it. As was the case in the source material, Sirius and his men had a code language they used whenever they wanted to speak in secret.

However! My knowledge of *Noble King* lore came in handy at a time like this!

There was a bonus episode in one of the books where Sil was studying ancient Esfian. This revealed that their code language was a riff off antiquated speech. I strained my ears to listen in.

"××●●△?"

"—■×○▼△×."

My dabbles in ancient Esfian are no match for their code… Not only that, but I'm realizing after the fact that I have no idea how they've tweaked the words or how the grammar even works!

So I gave up. All I could do was wait for them to finish talking.

Hmmm…but wait.

It was a bit warbled, but I think I just heard a name that sounded like "Klifford." Then, from his body language, I could tell that Hugh was apologizing for messing up. I guessed that there was a problem, but I was stuck in the limbo of not being able to join in on the conversation. All I could do was just stare intently at the pair.

Oh, wait—

As I stared at Sirius and Hugh, I got the vague sense that something was amiss. It was Hugh. It was the longsword he wore on his belt. The golden

tassel on it was, just like its counterpart in the light novels, a gift from my brother the day he was assigned to his post. And it was awkwardly short, as if somebody had cut it off.

A question formed in my mind. *Was his tassel always that short?*

I turned and looked back at the other two bodyguards who were with my brother. They looked back at me with a start, surprised by my sudden movement. I gave them my best Princess Smile as I seized the opportunity to check their sword tassels. Sirius gifted all his bodyguards a sword tassel of a similar design when they were appointed. So their tassel designs would be about the same as Hugh's, and they should be about the same length. But when I compared the two tassels of these bodyguards to Hugh's, they were twice as long.

So I was right. Hugh's is different. Did somebody cut it?

I considered that maybe it had been cut in battle—then I looked back at Sirius and Hugh. Hugh's guardsman uniform and grooming were immaculate. Not a stain or a tear to be seen. While I was still stuck on the mystery of Hugh's tassel, he finished talking to Sirius.

And after a very short pause, Sirius nodded gravely at Hugh and said, "Understood. I'll go ahead. Hugh, you stay behind and look after Octavia."

"As you wish, Your Highness." Hugh bowed to Sirius.

He'll go ahead…to do what?

"Brother—?" I blurted out.

Sirius answered quickly. "Octavia, the situation has changed a little. Hugh is going to guard you for a little while. You stay close to him." And with that, he swiftly turned on his heel. I tried to call out to him, but I could barely get the *B* part of *Brother* out of my mouth before he was already out of sight. The two guards who had been accompanying us earlier ran behind him.

Hugh and I were left alone.

A-an explanation would be nice!

I looked at Hugh. "Hugh Roberts, might I know what's going on?"

"I am going to take you to see Klifford Alderton in place of Prince Sirius."

"I take it my brother went to see Klifford ahead of us?"

Hugh's tucked chin was all the answer I needed.

“My brother said the situation has changed—can you elaborate? Why did my brother need to go there ahead of us?”

“Regarding the location of Klifford Alderton’s house arrest…there’s been a change. Prince Sirius has gone ahead to deal with it.”

When I heard Klifford was on house arrest, I’d just assumed he was staying in his room in the area reserved for guard quarters… If there was a change, did that mean he was moved from there?

“Where are we going?”

As Hugh was exercising his right to remain silent, I undauntedly persisted. “*Where* are we going?”

“……The training grounds,” Hugh answered reluctantly.

“I see…” I snapped Blackfeather shut. A man on house arrest at the training grounds? In the middle of the night? And what’s more, Sirius ran ahead of us when he heard the news.

I feel nothing but bad vibes about this!

I hitched up my skirt to make it easier to run.

“Your High—”

I’d spent the whole day sleeping and recharging. I could probably sprint the whole way. I was a little worried I’d bring my fever back…but so be it. If there was ever a time to push through the pain, it was now! I knew where he was now—I couldn’t be complacent!

I caught a glimpse of Hugh’s wide eyes as I bolted after my brother toward the training grounds.

“Hey! Wait!”

I’ve waited long enough, good sir!

…He caught up to me right away.

Not only were there no obstacles or crowds in Hugh’s way, but there was also a clear difference in physical ability at play! But I just kept running until I made it to the training grounds. There, I saw Sirius and his soldiers, who had gotten there ahead of us.

And in the moonlit training ground, a crowd had gathered in a corner. It was the area mainly used for practical exams. There was a platform, reserved for match-format sparring. The lanterns around it were lit.

“Draw your sword! Unless it really was a lie that you defeated an Adjutant? Eh, Klifford Alderton?!”

On the platform stood Klifford on one side and several of Sirius’s armed bodyguards on the other. And one of these bodyguards, a blond knight, was *kinda* provoking Klifford!

“Nathan! Your orders were to monitor him, not fight him!” Sirius’s rebuke flew at him.

Nathan…? As in, *the* Nathan?

“You lot, don’t just stand there!” he snapped at the other bodyguards.

“But, Prince Sirius! A man who scored so poorly on his practical exam—he couldn’t possibly have defeated an Adjutant! We were merely trying to prove that! It’s very important! And urgent!” The blond knight was the only one who dared talk back to Sirius.

I got close enough to get a better look at his face. *Oh…did Klifford catch my gaze?* I was about to take another step toward the platform when Hugh grabbed my arm.

“Sorry, Princess Octavia, but that’s as far as you go.”

“Unhand me.”

“You mustn’t go close to the platform—it’s too dangerous. Prince Sirius would not want it, either. Everyone is riled up right now. If you must approach him, do so later.”

“*Everyone’s* riled up? Don’t you mean *Nathan*?”

The blond knight’s full name was Nathan Holden. And he was in the source material frequently, which was why I remembered him quite clearly. I mentioned earlier that Sirius had two trusted bodyguards. One of them was Hugh. Well, the other one was this guy: Nathan!

With silken locks of gold and violet eyes, he looked like a dreamy nobleman…but fans of *The Noble King* called him a himbo, and a faction of them loved the guy to death!

“My master’s enemy is my enemy! My master’s ally is my ally! And my master’s loved ones, I shall protect with my life!” He had a very straightforward personality, just like that. He was one-dimensional. And yet he was quite cognizant of the subtleties of Sirius’s feelings. That was why my brother valued him highly. However—

He acted on instinct, not intelligence… Dude was impulsive AF. He’d sometimes act outside the scope of Sirius’s imagination, too. Sometimes he

would disobey Sirius's order *because* he was so loyal. In the books, Sirius would always forgive him, flaws and all.

As a reader, I sometimes thought, *Is it really okay to have a bodyguard like that?!* But at the end of the day, that was just Nathan! You couldn't help but root for the guy.

What's more, for all his flaws, Nathan did a good job. You could cherry-pick out the times he failed, but in the end, you'd sometimes find he'd actually made the right call.

Since Nathan was so one-dimensional, he was revered by all. In other words, if Nathan ever jumped the gun, a crowd of people was sure to follow him.

And—we were seeing that in action right now!

Also, since *"My master's enemy is my enemy!,"* Nathan naturally perceived me as his adversary.

As I stood there, having a staring contest with Hugh—

"Princess Octavia!"

—someone shouted at me from the platform. It was…Nathan?

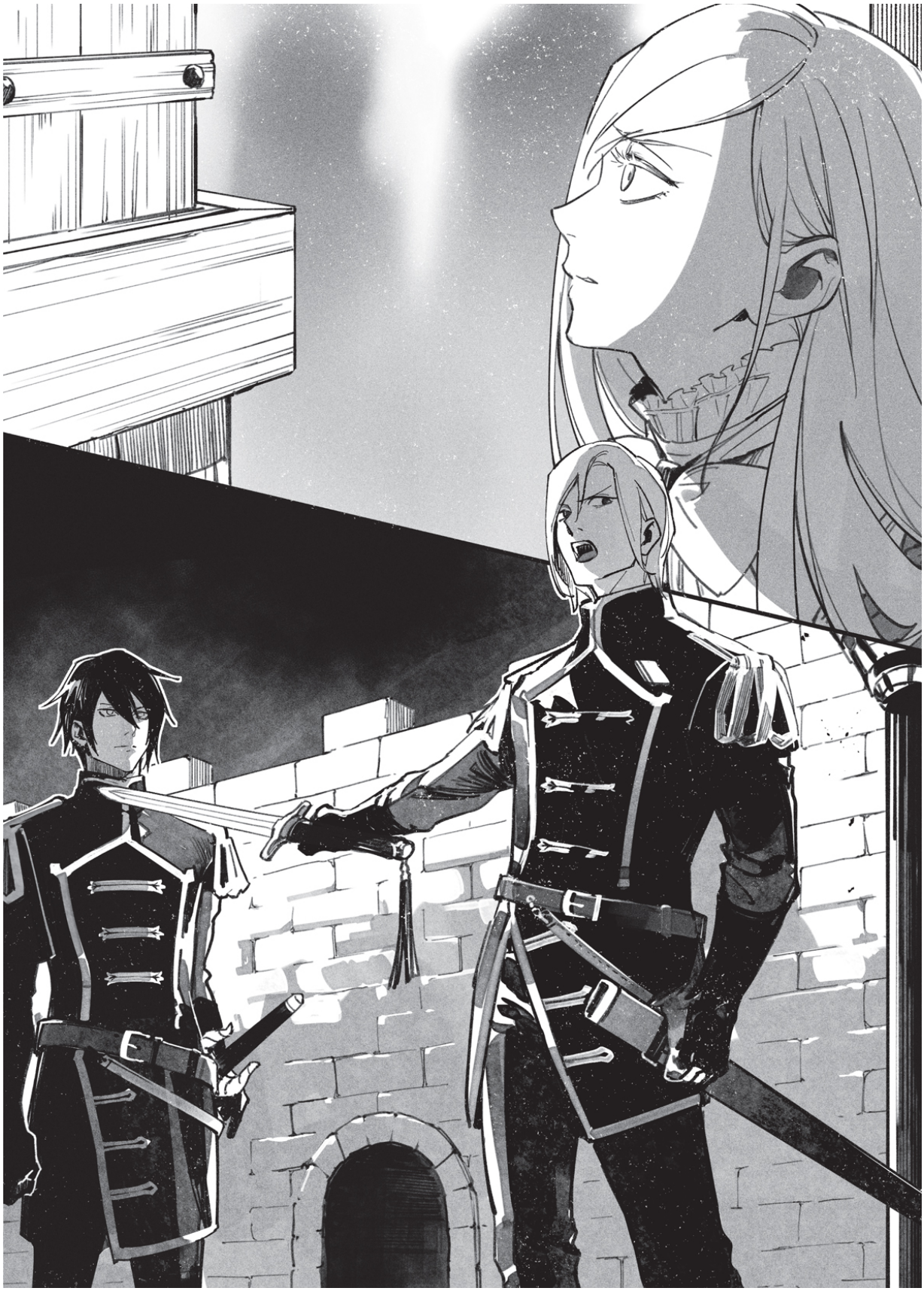
Sensing something was amiss, Hugh gently released me. I looked back toward the platform. Nathan's violet eyes bored into me.

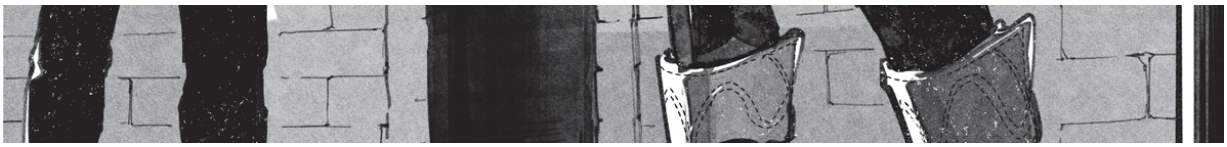
"I, Nathan Holden, have a few questions to ask you!"

50

Holding his gaze fast on me, Nathan pointed his unsheathed sword at Klifford.

"Among the final list of candidates, this man made no impression—nor on the practical exam!" The golden tassel at the end of his sword hilt shook with every word. "For what *reason* did you appoint him as your personal bodyguard?!"





Nathan’s question hurled at me from the platform, and the watchful eyes of the onlookers followed.

Nathan was a straightforward man. Meaning he was always direct in all matters. Lacking the social finesse necessary to thrive in noble circles, it was lucky for him that he was the second-born and chose a knight’s life. *The Noble King* even said as much about him.

Naturally, Nathan’s questions were also straightforward.

“I had no reason in particular.”

So I gave him a straightforward answer.

Wh-whoops!

I’d used eeny-meeny-miny-moe to choose Klifford, and I only found out about his low practical exam score, like, three days ago…

So when asked for my reason… By the time I realized my mistake, it was already too late.

Immediately after, I became aware of numerous incredulous stares from not only Nathan but the other bodyguards and my brother as well…!

I *probably* should have given it some thought and said something cryptic implying I had a super-significant reason!

No, I *definitely* should have.

I can still save this. C-come on, brain!

When Klifford asked me something similar earlier, I said something like “It was an oracle from the Sky” *right? I could use that… No, no, wait a minute! When I said that, didn’t Klifford have a strange reaction? So maybe I should avoid using the same excuse with Nathan and his posse?*

While I stood there, sweating profusely on the inside, Nathan quipped, “Do you mean to say, Princess, that you chose the lowest-performing candidate for *no reason*?”

Yeah, I totally get it, buddy… Most people would choose the *highest*-performing candidate.

So why would I choose the lowest-performing candidate—Klifford—in spite of this? *I need a reason…a reason… B-bullshit powers, activate…*

Eureka!

I flashed a Princess Smile at Nathan atop the platform. Then I said, eloquently, “Anyone would do.”

However, there’s a caveat!

“Anyone…you say?”

“Yes.” I nodded confidently. “After all, any man who made it to the final round of candidates to be my bodyguard would surely carry out his duties without a problem, no matter who he was. Am I wrong?”

A bodyguard’s fundamental job was to protect the royal family. As far as I was concerned, any soldier who made it up the ranks as a candidate would be a favorable choice for my bodyguard. Though there may have been some differences in ability among the candidates, they all passed the qualification test!

It’s kind of like…an RPG! If you go up against a level-100 final boss at level 1, it’s game over before you’ve even started. But if it’s between a player at level 110 and another player at level 150, either one could beat the final boss, no problem. In other words, all the candidates who made it through to the final round were above level 110. Even though Klifford scored the lowest out of everyone, his level was still more than high enough.

Besides, if I actually tried to calculate Klifford’s level, 110 wouldn’t even come close… He was an Adjutant who defeated another Adjutant, so by that standard, he would be, like, level 200… No, higher even?

“As long as he made it to the final round of candidates, I saw no need to give further credence to his score on the practical exam. So when you asked me why I chose Klifford based off his test score, well, I have to answer that I had no reason.”

That was my roundabout way of saying: “*I prioritized his other attributes!*” I think I did pretty good? I pushed through the discomfort and covered my ass with flying colors!

Without skipping a beat, Nathan answered, “I see what you’re trying to say, Your Highness. Indeed, a man who made it to the final round of candidates would be capable of carrying out his bodyguard duties, even if his score on the practical exam was the lowest.”

Cool, cool, cool. Nathan understands—

“However!”

—not a damn thing!

His violet eyes flashed open. “That was *not* answering my question! Let me rephrase it. What quality in Klifford compelled you to appoint him as your bodyguard? I’d like to hear *that* answer!” Nathan was so intense that his doll-like noble facade was threatening to shatter.

H-his reaction is worse…much worse than when I answered that I had no reason!

Then I had a thought.

According to my extensive expertise on *The Noble King* lore, Nathan was the sort of character who didn't understand trickery or sophism. My original answer, "I had no reason," was truthful, but right afterward, I had tried to trick him.

Conversely put, clumsy logic and arguments don't work. So maybe dumb honesty will?

Now my path was clear!

"Fair point… I'll answer honestly. I chose Klifford because—" I took a breath. I ditched my Princess Smile and replaced it with a genuine one. "Because I felt a connection to him."

There. Sincerity. No logic. Let's appeal to emotion, baby!

"You felt a connection…" This time, Nathan toned down quite a bit. He paused thoughtfully…though the tip of his sword was still pointed at Klifford. "So you're saying, out of all the candidates, you liked him the best? So you made him your bodyguard?" Nathan asked, dead serious.

L-like?!

I mean, if I had to choose between like and dislike, I like him, of course? He's not wrong… But he was *kinda* paraphrasing "I felt a connection"!

I was so flustered that it took everything in me not to take back what I'd said. I consoled myself with Blackfeather, lifting it to my face.

Okay, Octavia, what you need most of all right now is to answer yes as simply—and as naturally—as possible!

"Yes, that is exactly right." But I couldn't resist using my Princess Smile as a crutch.

"……" After several seconds of painful silence, Nathan lowered his sword and bowed his head. "I thank you humbly for your answer, Highness. I offer my deepest apologies that I, Nathan Holden, asked such a rude question of you."

Phew…

As long as Nathan's burying the hatchet, all's well that ends well…

"Stand up. I believe it's only come to this because others besides you had similar doubts."

Doubts significant enough to gather a crowd in the training ground in the middle of the night.

"Yes, Highness." Nathan nodded slowly and deeply. Then he raised his lowered sword again. "Therefore, I have only one more question!"

Ugh.

"It was a matter of personal taste. I have no objections to your stated reason for choosing this man as your bodyguard. However—" Yet again, the tip of Nathan's sword pointed at Klifford. "This man fought an Adjutant…and *won*? No matter how you say it, I have a hard time believing it on word alone."

Nathan stared hard at Klifford. And Klifford stared right back, without a hint of agitation.

"If it is true, then I insist we have proof!" No sooner did he make his declaration than Nathan took a sword from another bodyguard and tossed it at Klifford's feet. That was code for "Fight me!" But Klifford didn't even flinch.

Are we back to square one, then?

Klifford scoring the lowest on the practical exam *was* the real problem here… Even the lowest-scoring candidate could carry out his bodyguard duties well. But he couldn't defeat an Adjutant.

Okay…let's do this.

I looked up at Klifford. His indigo eyes met mine. "Klifford."

"Yes?"

"I command you to duel Nathan and win. And without hurting him."

The look in the bodyguards' eyes changed in a flash. Nathan was certainly no weakling. So adding the caveat that Klifford not hurt Nathan was a huge insult. But I'd seen Klifford's OP exploits on full display with my own eyes. Even with that caveat, I knew he wouldn't fail me!

"Yes, Highness…I won't hurt him. Understood," Klifford answered with complete poise as he picked up the sword at his feet.

But just as the two men took fighting stances— "Wait." Sirius, who had been silently watching my whole exchange with Nathan, spoke up in protest.

"Brother…?"

Was he going to forbid the duel? I suppose that would be the correct thing to do…or so I thought!

“Nathan is quite powerful. But if Klifford beat him one-on-one, I’m sad to say that still would not prove that he could defeat an Adjutant. Adjutants are in a class of their own.”

Things are taking a dark turn here!

“Brother, what are you suggesting…?”

“Aside from Hugh—he’ll stay by your side—if Klifford can defeat everyone on that platform, I think that will finally be proof enough. Naturally, this includes the caveat that he not hurt them—not a single one.”

My brother just put the game on hard mode!

Sirius folded his arms and moved his gaze from the platform onto me. “What do you say, Octavia?”

What do I say…?

Then—

“Princess Octavia,” Klifford quietly called out to me. “If you wish for me to win, then *give me your command*.”

I got the sense he was proclaiming to me that he could beat everyone without hurting a soul.

“Not a single man gets hurt… That includes you, Klifford. Don’t forget that.”

Klifford smirked. “Yes, Princess. I will remember.”

51

“Well, that’s settled,” Sirius muttered tonelessly immediately after Klifford’s answer. His aquamarine eyes challenged me. Blackfeather jumped defensively to my face as I stared back. Then Sirius added, pushing the point home, “Your bodyguard must win, harming none of his opponents, nor himself—the latter is at your request. Does this sound good to you, Octavia?”

The meaning behind his words slowly sank in. Did it sound good…? Uh, no, it sounded *bad*! Wanting to protect Klifford from harm was noble and all, but all I did was raise the bar my brother already raised even higher! On my ally!

So the real question was—

“Does it sound good to *you*, Brother? Weren’t you trying to stop Holden earlier?”

Exactly! When we arrived at the training grounds, Sirius was admonishing Nathan. Yet now, he’d done a one-eighty and was eager for Nathan to fight. That seemed out of character.

But Sirius casually nodded and said, “I did try to stop him, at first. But now Klifford Alderton has taken arms as well—by your command. So why not let them fight?” He turned toward the platform. “Nathan! If Alderton defeats you under the provisions I’ve laid out, will you promise to never instigate this sort of thing again?”

Sword in hand, Nathan turned and stood at attention and answered promptly. “Aye! I, Nathan Holden, shall never seek proof again!”

Upon hearing his answer, Sirius turned back to me. “Given everything that’s happened, I had already deemed it necessary for you to have Alderton prove that he is skilled enough to defeat an Adjutant.”

Guy had a point. I was the one who ordered Klifford to win the duel! But I assumed it would just be Nathan vs. Klifford! I didn’t know it would turn into Klifford vs. everybody…

“My feelings aside, I figured you would be opposed to the idea, Brother.”

“Did I surprise you?”

“Yes, you did.”

I always thought Sirius was the stubborn type who wasn’t easily swayed by others. What brought about this sudden change?

“Well, shouldn’t you welcome my acquiescence?”

“Yes…I do.”

The duel was set in stone, then. So at the very least, I needed to play a card that would give Klifford a fighting chance!

“Having said that, the conditions as they stand now are simply too unfair for Klifford. At least let me create better conditions for him.”

Sirius said nothing. I took that as a yes and continued talking. “Allow my bodyguard to select his own weapon.” I looked at Klifford. “Klifford, choose your weapon.”

His indigo eyes widened a little. And there was a little smirk on his lips, too, as he answered me with a bow. “I’d like a practice spear.”

The mood on the platform changed. The air was filled with even more anger and tension than when I’d first commanded Klifford to beat Nathan

without harming either one of them. But I was just as taken aback as they were. I thought my request that he choose his own weapon was perfectly reasonable, given the extremely difficult conditions under which he was forced to duel.

But…a spear? And a practice one, at that?

Oh, wait! I remember now. When we were dancing in the practice room a few days ago, he did say he liked spears the best. That they'd served him well on the battlefield… Is that why he made that choice? And since he said himself that he wanted a practice spear, I've got to be right. Okay, Octavia. You must accept Klifford's proposal wholeheartedly!

I added my appeal on Klifford's behalf. "Brother, let Klifford use a practice spear."

"A *practice* spear? One with a busted tip?"

"That's right." I nodded eagerly.

Sirius held my gaze for a moment… Then he crossed his arms and calmly commanded, "Get Alderton what he wants." And in no time, a practice spear was brought up onto the platform. Nathan personally handed it to Klifford, and Klifford handed Nathan the sword he'd been holding.

The practice spear's tip… The sharp metal that would ordinarily be there was broken. It wasn't exactly a spear—more like a metal staff.

"This all right, Octavia? Alderton?" Sirius asked.

I looked up at Klifford on the platform. Spear in both hands, he answered, "If possible, I would like to add another rule: Disarmament means defeat."

"Not a problem," Sirius told him. "Now, to clarify, Octavia—" Sirius turned his attention back to me. "Alderton is the only one here who will change his weapon."

I gasped. *That means Klifford has to use a practice spear against the combat-ready longswords held by Nathan and his posse, right?*

A glance up at the platform revealed that Nathan looked displeased. He wanted to test Klifford's strength. If he had to use a practice spear, then everyone else should have to do the same.

But as for Klifford—

Our eyes locked. And ever so faintly, but firmly, Klifford nodded. I knew there was a meaning behind his silence. He would probably be okay.

I was going to say something to him, but I stopped myself. Instead, I nodded quietly back at him. Then I answered Sirius. "Everything is ready,

Brother. Now let the fight commence.”

The disarmed bodyguards were dumbstruck. But Klifford’s practice spear twirled relentlessly on. Klifford’s fighting style bore no resemblance to reality. He was like the star of a nonstop action movie who effortlessly performed impossible stunts. It was as if he and the spear were one.

A spear had a longer reach than a sword. Klifford used this to keep his opponents at a distance, aim for their weak spots, and disarm them one by one. With immaculate control, he targeted their weapons and took them down.

Within barely a few seconds of the signal to fight, he had already struck three swords to the ground. The remaining bodyguards learned from their comrades’ experience and were hypervigilant of Klifford. But the group of eight men including Nathan was whittled down to merely three in a matter of minutes.

Naturally, nobody was wounded. But two of the knights’ swords had been split cleanly in two. Even an amateur like me knew what was happening. So the men fighting surely knew better than anyone else. Nathan and his posse were putting up a good fight. They were anything but weak. But Klifford was far superior.

In no time, the last men standing were Klifford and Nathan. Both were silent. Not a word was uttered between them during combat.

Sirius and I were equally silent. We just stood there, enraptured by the action unfolding on the platform.

Nathan’s fighting style had changed a little. Instead of running around, trying to go where the spear couldn’t reach, he was doing the opposite. It was almost like he was…charging head-on toward the spear’s broken tip?

Agh! What the hell was that?! If Klifford hadn’t pulled back his spear, you’d be a shish kebab! Do you have a death wish, Nathan?!

The little dance repeated itself over and over, until even a dummy like me could tell what Nathan was trying to do.

Was he—trying to take advantage of the “do no harm” rule?

Were Klifford less skilled with his spear, Nathan would have been heavily wounded by now. But thankfully, Klifford was quite adept. In a weird way,

Nathan knew he was outmatched, so he was using that strategy—fighting in a way that held himself hostage.

At last, Nathan successfully ducked into the one area where Klifford was vulnerable. Impossible to keep his posture in getting there, Nathan fell to a knee. But that wouldn't stop him from swinging a sword. Nathan's sword swiftly stabbed up at Klifford.

But Klifford was no longer there. He moved with the same Adjutant's swiftness I had seen back in the Sky Chamber. Nathan's sword was piercing air. Then Klifford landed, striking Nathan's sword with his spear—

"Stop! I yield." Nathan chuckled, a look of satisfaction in his eyes.

Klifford's spear froze. Nathan had let his sword go willingly. The sound of it *clang*ing to the ground rang out.

Still on his knee, Nathan looked up at Klifford. "I've lost. I will take your word that you defeated an Adjutant. And I apologize for ever doubting you." Slowly, Nathan rose to his feet. Then he calmly asked Klifford, "But if this was the extent of your true skill, why did you slack on the practical exam?"

"I simply did not think it was worth the wasted effort," Klifford answered, without the slightest hesitation.

Wasted…effort? I had no clue where he was going with this.

"*What* did you say—?"

"I didn't think I would be chosen as a bodyguard. I heard from countless people that a peon from House Alderton would never be chosen. That the exams were nothing more than a formality, and that Princess Octavia's bodyguard had already been selected internally. What sort of person would take a challenge seriously if the results were already predetermined?"

Countless people? Which countless people?! Though to be fair…I do know quite a few people who would describe House Alderton's members as "peons." But who was this predetermined bodyguard I was supposedly assigned? It's not like Matilda handed me a document, saying, "This is the bodyguard we've chosen for you!"

"Then why didn't you withdraw your application?" Nathan pressed him further.

"Count Alderton adopted me into the family. It was the express wish of my father."

So even though his heart wasn't in the race, he couldn't go against his father's wishes to try… But we've still got an unsolved mystery here: The bodyguard who was supposedly predetermined for me. Not even my own father had said a word about it…

Aha! I spy a person right in front of me who I can ask!

"Brother, do you know which knight was predetermined as my bodyguard?"

You're a royal just like me, and the eldest prince at that, dear Brother!

My dear brother heaved a sigh. "Yes, I know him… Father recommended him."

Plot twist!

"It was Hugh."

My eyes shot open. It was news to me. I glanced at Hugh beside me, and he gave a small bow. "Why would Father assign me Hugh Roberts? He's your right-hand man."

"Most likely because he would serve you well as a bodyguard, I imagine?"

I felt incredibly sorry for Hugh as a bodyguard. He *would* have served me well. I don't even think he would have left me for another man… If Hugh and I had the same relationship as in the books, it would have been a win-win situation for both of us.

Hmmm… Hugh as my bodyguard… I… I just can't see it.

"And what was Hugh's opinion on the matter?"

"He was in agreement…"

Huh?! Wait, "was in agreement" as in, because it would enable him to keep a close eye on me so I wouldn't come between Sirius and Sil?

Maybe I'm just being paranoid…

"But, Brother, I received no official word on the matter."

I literally found out about it just now!

"It was an order from Father at the very last minute that you should make the final decision. But rumors of the preselected bodyguard had already spread far and wide by then."

Thanks for the assist, Father! If you hadn't given that order, I wouldn't have been able to choose Klifford by the power of eeny-meeny-miny-moe!

"Understood. It's all in the past. It should be perfectly clear now why Klifford did not fight to the fullest of his ability in the practical exam. He

defeated everyone with the caveat that nobody get hurt, besides. Klifford followed the rules, and he won. Now will you release him from house arrest?”

Sirius shook his head. “I can’t do that. Your bodyguard is still suspected of tampering with Sil’s carriage. All this fight has made clear is that he had the ability to defeat an Adjutant in combat.”

Grr. Guess I can’t chip away at my brother.

Fine. I’ll just ask Klifford directly!

I snapped Blackfeather open. “Klifford. As you heard, my dear brother has accused you of tampering with Lord Sil’s carriage. Did you do it?”

I’m as close to 100 percent certain as possible that he didn’t!

“No—I did not do it.”

There! See?

“Then answer me this, Alderton,” Sirius cut in loudly. “Why did you not say so all this time? You could have simply told the truth.”

I also found that perplexing. Even if he was refusing to speak without my express permission, he was a suspect in a serious crime.

“I’d also like an answer to that, Klifford. Was there a reason you remained silent?”

“I determined—that it would be meaningless for me to tell the truth when there might be a dangerous traitor nearby.”

So…what exactly is he saying here?

“Well, I would like you to tell me the truth,” I told him.

“The day before the junior ball, after I finished my day’s service to Your Highness and was making my way back to my quarters, I witnessed someone in the distance near Burks’s carriage.”

After he finished his day’s service… So it was nighttime. Wait, but then—

“And you didn’t find this person’s presence to be at all suspicious?” I asked.

“No, Highness.”

“Why not?”

“He was wearing a bodyguard’s uniform like my own—and he had a golden tassel on his sword hilt.”

A golden tassel! That could only mean one thing.

“It was one of my brother’s bodyguards?”

“Yes,” Klifford answered succinctly.

Ordinarily, if a bodyguard were spotted at night near Sil's carriage, nobody would think anything was amiss. Bodyguards had the privilege of wandering the castle grounds freely, regardless of the time of day. And Klifford had that privilege, too. The only reason he was seen as suspicious this time was because of Sil's carriage accident.

Nobody would find it strange to see Sirius's bodyguards near Sil's carriage at night. If anything, they would think it natural. Sirius might have ordered them to guard it. But if one of Sirius's bodyguards were to be seen near Sil's carriage the night before an accident—that man would be incredibly suspicious.

"Brother, did you order any of your bodyguards to check up on Lord Sil's carriage that night?"

"No—I didn't," Sirius responded grimly.

"Then I implore you, don't ignore Klifford's testimony."

If the mastermind who sabotaged Sil's carriage might very well be on the scene, Klifford definitely couldn't have been like, "*Yeah, no, the bad guy's one of* your *men, Sirius!*" That would be a *geeenius* move.

Sirius shot a question at Klifford. "But you saw him from a distance, right? Did you see his face?"

"I didn't."

"Then how do you know it was one of my men? Do you honestly expect me to believe you saw the tassel but not the face?"

"It's just—a quirk of mine, Highness."

Sirius frowned.

"When I see someone, the first thing I check is their weapon. It was the same when I saw the silhouette. I checked his weapon first."

And what Klifford saw when he did check the weapon was the golden tassel on the sword hilt—the very tassel that Sirius gifted his bodyguards.

Hugh stood protectively by my side. Nathan and Sirius's other bodyguards stood on the platform. In the plot of the books, this never happened. Sirius's bodyguards never tried to hurt Sil. But I doubted Klifford would lie.

"Brother—suspicion of Klifford is based on testimony only, correct? So how does Klifford's statement now factor into everything? A new suspect has emerged—are you going to ignore that?"

If this is the Sirius from the books—the brother I know—I knew he would have to answer no.

52

Sirius was about to answer promptly. But for some reason, he stopped himself mid-breath and pressed his lips into a tight line.

Silence filled the air.

U-uh…why no answer?

Should he acknowledge the new suspect or ignore him? I think it's a pretty straightforward question—now I'm starting to get worried!

I opened Blackfeather to distract from the anxious feeling of butterflies in my stomach.

Sirius was one of *The Noble King*'s main protagonists—he was its hero. And back when I was but an innocent young reader, I remember squealing over him. But thanks to my fangirl past, I have a pretty good grasp on Sirius's behavior! (Or at least I like to think I do.)

Strangely enough, my obscure *The Noble King* knowledge has come in handy!

In the books, there was a scene like this where a similar question was hurled at Sirius. It was in one of the episodes that bookended the Council of Feudal Lords. The culprit was a henchman or somebody in the Adulterous Nobles faction! And Sirius and his men vaguely knew it! So the Adulterous Nobles faction sent someone after him!

Hugh fell under suspicion and was denounced as a criminal before the public. Naturally, it was all BS, but there was so much evidence against him that Sirius couldn't defend Hugh properly at the time.

And the question that struck down Sirius for good was this: *"Prince Sirius, the evidence is all on full display. Do you mean to declare him innocent merely on the grounds that he is your bodyguard?"*

And with a broken heart, Sirius gave the command. *"Guard… Bind Hugh Roberts in chains."*

"I was worried you would protect him, but you are truly a just and impartial prince, Your Highness. My mind is at ease now that the culprit is

in chains." His political opponent smirked.

When I read that part of the story, I was so pissed…

However! If Sirius was the kind of character who could be like, "You're *the one who's sus! Hugh is totally innocent! I don't care if there's evidence against him. If it's my bro, I'll let it pass!*" (loose translation), the scene would've gone completely different!

But that scene was juicy *because* Sirius trusted him and had to bind him in chains. A few days later at the trial, he totally beat his political enemy anyway.

Yup. So this Sirius will act just like book-Sirius. He'll treat his suspects seriously, even if they're his own trusted bodyguards. I know he'll do that… Or…will he…?

Argh! Let's just give him a nudge!

"Dear Broth—"

"Prince Sirius! We have all pledged our loyalty to the crown and to you. There would never be a traitor among us!"

Just as I was about to give my brother a push, one of his bodyguards epically drowned out my voice with his imploration. I looked over to them and saw that many of them seemed to agree with the sentiment. Some were even unable to hold back their brazen glares in Klifford's direction—they probably thought he was giving a false testimony out of desperation.

The one who surprised me was Nathan. From what I knew about him, *he* would definitely take the initiative to second what the beseeching bodyguard said. But a look of clarity had shown in his eyes when Klifford beat him in combat, so his opinion had taken a sharp turn now, and he was deep in thought.

Hugh, Sirius's other closest bodyguard, was silent. His expression remained hard as stone—it was impossible to tell whether or not he agreed. Either way, in the books, Hugh always went along with whatever Sirius said.

"Klifford Alderton."

My gaze shot back to Sirius. When he finally spoke, it was at Klifford.

"Can you vow in the name of the Sky God that what you said is true?"

This whole "vow in the name of the Sky God" thing was a set phrase in Esfia. It was used both with royalty and with God. Its properties were a bit

different from the vow exchanged between master and vassal. It meant “I solemnly swear that I am not lying.”

But wait a minute. Considering the intent behind the question Sirius asked Klifford, asking him to “vow” might actually be effective.

I cut into the conversation. “No, that is not enough.”

“Not enough?”

“It pains me to say this, but you suspect Klifford, dear Brother. So wouldn’t you also suspect whatever he says to you? Your men as well… I doubt that Klifford vowing in the name of the Sky God would do anything to change their minds.”

Even a vow was only a vow.

“Klifford should vow not in the Sky God’s name but in mine. That way, Klifford’s testimony might as well have come from my own lips.”

Aside from vowing in the name of the Sky God, somebody could also vow in the name of an individual. And that vow held more weight.

Why? Because it was a vow that was normally given to a god. As a vow could not be made unilaterally, the vow *receiver* was the one who took on the risk. If a human being took on the vow in place of God, then it meant the *human* vow receiver took on the same responsibility as the giver.

In this case, if Klifford’s vow in the name of the Sky God turned out to be false, Klifford would be punished. But if he vowed in my name and he turned out to be lying, then I would be equally guilty and punished for it.

But the moment a vow was made, Klifford’s testimony would carry more weight. Klifford’s testimony would be a proxy for my testimony. That’s how it worked.

If nobody trusted Klifford as a witness, then all I needed to do was back him up and dispel their distrust! As a princess, I’m the perfect backer-upper!

And if his testimony came from a princess, my level of authority would *have* to give him more credibility!

“Are you in earnest…? If his testimony is proved false, you will suffer the same fate as him.” There were angry undertones in Sirius’s voice.

Well, it made sense, he took after book-Sirius, after all!

When Hugh was arrested on bogus charges and gave his testimony, there was an outcry from the Adulterous Nobles faction that he was unqualified to give testimony. But Sirius helped Hugh cross that hurdle by letting him

vow in his name as eldest prince. That scene was a callback to the episode where he gave Hugh the golden tassel.

“Brother, if Hugh were accused, you would do the same for him.”

And in the books, some of his supporters did get mad at him for doing just that!

If his enemy’s plot had gone according to plan and Hugh had been sentenced for his crime, Sirius would have received the same punishment. If you think about the worst-case scenario, Sirius letting Hugh vow in his name was pretty reckless.

But Sirius trusted that Hugh was innocent and that he would never tell a lie, so he used the boldest tactic possible to protect his vassal.

Which is exactly what I’m doing now!

“Klifford! To me.”

When I called him, Klifford gracefully descended from the platform. It was quite a ways off the ground, so it was way out of range for me to jump with ease—but he jumped with his spear in hand, landed without a hint of a wobble, and walked over to me. I called him over to vow in my name, and perhaps because of this, Klifford did not stop there.

But then Sirius spoke up to stop me. “Octavia, he doesn’t need to vow in your name. I don’t want to go to those extremes.”

“Shall I vow in the name of the Sky God?” Klifford chimed in.

Ummm…

“Klifford, would you like to vow in the name of the Sky God?” I asked.

“Not exactly…” At least he gave it a good thinking over. But his answer remained the same.

The only personal drawback of vowing in the name of the Sky God was when the vow giver was determined to be lying.

“In that case, Brother, my answer is *no*.” I snapped Blackfeather closed. *Your girl is locked and loaded!* “The night before the junior ball, Klifford witnessed a bodyguard with a golden tassel—one of your men. If your words are true, Klifford, then vow not in the name of the Sky God but in mine.” I looked up at Klifford with a dramatic flourish.

His deep indigo eyes looked down into mine. “As you command.” He nodded. Then he vowed. “I vow not in the name of the Sky God but in the name of Princess Octavia.”

You carry out your vow to the Sky God by casting your weapon aside as you say the words. It symbolizes a release of power to enter the Sky God's protection. But when the vow is made to another person, the vow giver hands his weapon to the vow receiver, and they hold on to it together with their left hands. Since most people are right-handed, by performing the task with your clumsy left hand, it symbolizes that the vow is more difficult than surrendering everything to God. Lefthanded, ambidextrous, and other rare exceptions all get a pass.

Sooo…the person receiving the vow is supposed to offer their left hand and take the weapon. Okay!

Holding my closed fan in my right hand, I extended my left hand in front of me. In accordance with the vow, since Klifford's weapon was a spear with a broken head, it should work if we both gripped the spear together.

When Klifford saw the bandage on my left hand, his gaze shook a little with emotion…or at least I got that sense. *He had said he was furious… Is his anger coming back to him? B-but we made up! We made up, remember?!*

"Your Highness—as your left hand is wounded, please be careful." Klifford brought the spear in his left hand closer to me. I gripped the spear's hilt.

Okay…it's not at all heavy. Lighter than a piece of paper! I didn't even have to be careful. Klifford was the one actually holding the spear—I was just gripping it. *Is this okay, though…? Shouldn't I also be taking some of its weight?* I shot Klifford a questioning glance. There was a faint shift in his gaze… I got a sense of discomfort from it. He seemed to have received my message. But the metal spear still felt no heavier than a piece of paper to me.

"That will do…," Sirius said. "Octavia, Klifford Alderton's testimony is as good as your own word. This is a fact understood not only by me but everyone here." His voice boomed out hintingly to his men.

Awww, yeah. Mission accomplished!

"Now, Brother, in addition to that, I want you to answer my question. You still haven't answered it. Will you take the new suspects into consideration or won't you?"

This time, he answered promptly. "Of course I'll take them into consideration. I can't ignore suspicious behavior from anyone."

S-so that must mean…!

"In light of the new testimony, I cannot turn a blind eye on the other suspects. After all…I said as much at the very start."

Hmm? What had he said? I retraced my steps… *Aha! He must be referring to what he said in my room.*

"But how credible is this witness? And you said 'resembling,' didn't you? Bodyguards all wear the same uniform. There's no guarantee it was Kliff—"

"There's no guarantee it wasn't. *We cannot turn a blind eye on this matter—not when there's a testimony. Are you fine with letting a suspect loose? Well, I'm not."*

Yeah, he did say that.

So if he turned a blind eye on Klifford's testimony, his words would snap back like a boomerang and bite him in the ass.

I seem to remember there was more to what he said…

"You also said, 'At the very least, I must put him under observation until his name is cleared.' …Correct?"

"Yes."

"So will you give your bodyguards the same treatment as Klifford?"

Sirius nodded. "I will."

"…!"

I get the feeling everything's gonna go swimmingly!

But feelings are just feelings. I forgot that sometimes they're way off.

I hid my mouth with Blackfeather as I heaved a heavy sigh.

"Princess Octavia, are you feeling unwell?" Hugh asked without delay.

"I feel quite chipper, thank you," I answered with a Princess Smile.

Hugh asked… My brother's most trusted bodyguard, *Hugh Roberts*, asked.

And that's the thing.

I felt perfectly healthy. Considering I was up until late at night, I woke at the usual time in the morning without a problem. And I enjoyed a lovely breakfast of eggs—in my past life, I would have called it a fluffy cheese

omelet. My fever was down, and my hand wound had not worsened. The castle doctor applied the salve and redressed it.

However.

Now that it was the morning after the intense exchange I'd had with my brother in the training ground the night before…*Hugh Roberts* was my personal bodyguard!

This was because of the two conflicting testimonies. Sirius suspected Klifford of sabotaging Sil's carriage. According to one testimony, a man resembling Klifford wearing the bodyguard's uniform was spotted there. Meanwhile, Klifford testified that he had also spotted a silhouette near the carriage in question that night. And with a golden tassel on his sword hilt, this silhouetted man bore the markings of Sirius's bodyguard.

Both of these bodyguard sightings happened the night before the junior ball. The only difference was affiliation. Was it my bodyguard (Klifford) or Sirius's bodyguard (one of many)? What transpired after was what you'd see in any detective novel: My brother questioned his men to find out who had alibies. Those with alibies were in the clear and sent back to work. Those without alibies were relieved of duty and put under surveillance just like Klifford.

Up until that point, everything had gone swimmingly. I was pleased with how things proceeded, too. So I used the *I'm kinda scared and unsafe not having a bodyguard* angle to plead to Sirius in hopes of setting Klifford free…

And that backfired.

"Very well. I'll let you have Hugh for a while."

"Very well"? It's not at all very well!

Of all Sirius's bodyguards on the scene, Hugh had the strongest alibi. It was even corroborated. And based off the source material, Hugh was definitely not an evil mastermind who would have sabotaged Sil's carriage. I didn't think Nathan was, either.

But even if they weren't the masterminds, that didn't change the fact that they were still Sirius's left- and right-hand men. If I slipped up, they were sure to tattle to my brother about it…

My nerves… I can't calm my nerves!

The worst part was the awkwardness. It really made me realize just how much Klifford had integrated himself with my daily routine. Everything just

felt so *weird*.

To make matters worse, visiting Sil, meeting freely with Klifford, going to the library, the planned castle town inspection—everything was rejected.

I slapped myself on the head. *Stop that. Look on the bright side! Last night's standoff with my brother did bring up some positive changes!* First off, the area I was allowed to roam in had grown a little. I was allowed to be in the garden as well as my room! And not the fancy garden we had to show off to guests but one of the little side gardens. The same garden where I'd spotted Edgar in the middle of the night and thought it would be a lovely place for a night walk. And the same garden…where Klifford had put Lieche orchids in my hair. When I requested it be that garden, it was approved!

I mean, it's so depressing being cooped up in your room all day. A girl needs to get some air, even if it's just on the castle grounds!

And so I took a deep breath in and out. It was a perfect day for a walk. So I was making the most of the sole privilege I'd won and enjoying my stroll. I had come all the way to the center of the garden. The healthy white Lieche orchids soothed my frayed nerves. Every time I smelled them, I marveled at their lovely fragrance. It was subtle and elegant. And if my imagination served me correctly, this was exactly the sort of spot Queen Idéalia would have loved.

The garden's healing effects were stellar. It even felt like my brain fog was starting to clear! I just might get a stroke of inspiration from it!

Like, for example…hmmm…

Maybe I should just make Hugh my ally!

Positive change number two: With Hugh as a go-between, it was much easier to communicate with Sirius now.

I turned around and looked at Hugh. In the books, Octavia and Hugh were good friends. Did I still have a chance to make that happen now…?

Truth be told, all I knew about this version of Hugh was that he and Sirius were super tight. We knew each other's names and faces, and we interacted with each other daily since we occupied the same spaces…but that was all.

I need an organic conversation starter…something that won't make Hugh suspicious… Aha!

"Hugh…what happened to your golden tassel?"

"It was a gift from Prince Sirius."

“Yes, I know that. But isn’t it supposed to be longer?”

Yet it is short!

“Why…are you asking?”

“Let’s just say something feels amiss.”

I mean, in the books, Hugh loooved his golden tassel. So why’s it short?

But judging by his reaction, I get the sense my conversation attempt was a big fail.

After a long pause, Hugh uttered the unexpected. “Might I answer your question, Your Highness, by offering one of my own?”

“Yes, if it’s a question I can answer.”

I couldn’t answer just *anything*, of course!

“Hypothetically speaking, let’s say you were given two orders from His Majesty the King. But those two orders conflicted with each other. This means you have to choose between the two orders. Your Highness…how would you decide which order to follow?”

“Well…what are the orders?”

“The orders themselves are irrelevant. All that matters is that they are in direct opposition to each other. Be realistic with yourself, Your Highness, and consider how you would act.”

If my father gave me two orders that directly opposed each other…? The first example that popped into my mind was: *Marry for Esfia!* and *Marry for Love!* I guess that would serve as a decent hypothetical. So which order would I obey…?

“Well, I would choose the order I wanted to obey.”

I’d marry for love!

“The order you want to obey…,” Hugh murmured, lowering his gaze. “I suppose…that is one way of thinking about it.”

I guess that meant Hugh had a differing opinion.

“Well, I’m glad I could provide some insight,” I said.

Though Hugh’s question was so cryptic, I had no idea whether I actually did provide any insight!

“All right, Your Highness, now I’ll answer your question,” Hugh said, gripping the hilt of his sword at his waist and displaying the golden tassel. “I have only my own ineptitude to blame for this. It happened while I was on duty a few days ago. I captured an enemy, but they outwitted me and cut my tassel. Since it was the result of my own shortcomings, I’m keeping it

short in penance. But I’m afraid the sight of it caused you distress, Princess. And for that I apologize.”

After what sounded like a scripted response and a textbook-perfect knight’s bow, Hugh righted himself after barely a few seconds. Then, with his hand still on the sword hilt, he turned to look in another direction. And barely a moment later, somebody appeared where Hugh was looking. Hugh released his sword hilt and bowed again.

Well, the person was kinda the second-most important figure in Esfia after my father.

With a bundle of freshly picked Lieche orchids in his arms, the light brown eyes behind his glasses widened slightly at the sight of me and Hugh.

“Octavia and…Hugh? What an unusual pairing,” Edgar said with a smile.

That One Night—with Derek Nightfellow

With a sigh, Derek tossed his jacket into his lamplit room. A full day had passed since the junior ball, and he was finally able to go home. That being said, it wasn't until late at night that he had finally arrived at the Nightfellow villa on the castle grounds.

He loosened his collar and sank deep into a chair. Sil was safe, and the first round of the intelligence briefing was submitted. His father was speaking with King Enoch, and he had delivered all the news to Sirius. All that remained now was Sirius's investigation—things would change depending on how that went.

Derek ran his fingers through his hair as he thought back to Sirius's reaction at the castle. Being longtime friends, he could tell that Sirius was exerting quite an effort to remain calm and collected. He also knew that Sirius's distrust of Octavia had only grown stronger.

"Seriously…he's the polar opposite of who he used to be," he grumbled.

In the past, Derek was the one who had disliked Octavia, not Sirius. Sirius cared for his sister, more than most big brothers would.

"Don't you think it's horrible, how differently Octavia treats Alec and me?"

Whenever Sirius ardently implored Derek's sympathy like that, he was always tempted to scream at the ceiling: "*Just drop it already!*"

"*I blame Alec, too! He always flaunts how much Octavia loves him…*"

"*Why are you so obsessed with Princess Octavia?*"

"*She's my sister.*"

"*Sister, eh…?*"

At the time, Derek was tormented by the mystery of it all. If he were in Sirius's shoes, he would have hated to have Octavia as a little sister. Her attitude was enough reason. Octavia shunned Sirius. What was so precious about that? It irked Derek how much his father seemed soft on her, too.

"*Derek, if Octavia were an animal, what would she be?*"

"*Uhhh…*"

"*I think she'd be a kitten. Trembling, untrusting, and fragile.*"

Sirius had said that in earnest, but Derek couldn't endorse the opinion in the slightest.

"*Um, what? Sirius…is your head on straight?*"

The child prodigy and princess of Esfia, doted on by his father—was fragile? The strong-willed girl who seemed older than her years and who never responded to anything he did to her?

Those thoughts and negative feelings for Octavia boiled up inside of him and erupted. Even after his father had harshly punished him for brawling with Sirius, his feelings did not change.

His feelings for her did not change…until that one day.

In Esfia's castle town, there were kallum trees. These were gifted to Esfia from a distant kingdom as a diplomatic gesture. Once a year for thirty days, these trees would bloom with rosy blossoms that fluttered to the ground and delighted everyone who saw them. Derek's mother loved the trees and planted one at the Nightfellow villa on the castle grounds.

One day, this tree at the villa bloomed for the first time. It happened to be a day when Octavia was visiting. Derek gave her the obligatory polite greeting and nothing more. He did not want to see her. He assumed she wouldn't stay long, but for some reason, Octavia *had* to be selfish and beg to stay the night. His father and mother happily agreed…which only annoyed Derek further.

So he hadn't been able to sleep that night and left his bedchamber. Exercise was the best remedy for insomnia. He figured a brief jog in the

garden would make him sleepy. And since their villa was guarded, even a childlike Derek was safe to roam about unattended as long as he wasn't caught. He had even made some allies who turned a blind eye to it.

But when he slipped outside that night—Derek spotted Octavia. She was standing still, staring listlessly up at the kallum tree.

"Sakura ×%@○#●□★……

She was murmuring in what sounded like some magic tongue, a language she did not use much anymore. This mystical language that only she understood—Derek hated that about her, too. Why didn't she just speak Esfian? But neither her father nor Sirius insisted that she do so.

Octavia continued in her mystical language. For the life of him, Derek couldn't understand what she was saying. But the irritation he felt at the start had softened. It was because behind the nonsensical words Octavia strung together…Derek could hear the desolation in her voice. Unless he was mistaken, she was crying.

This confused him. It made no sense. Why was Esfia's princess in such anguish?

Unless…it was *because* of her position as Esfia's princess? Because she rarely got to see her biological parents? No…he sensed it was something far greater than that.

Octavia wrapped her arms around the trunk of the kallum tree. "○■★×、□&◇♮▼△○%☆……? □♭#●、□♮#●、□×♮#●……◎△×★◇◇□◆△&■。——#※□△△."

Was she sad? Why?

As Octavia clung to the tree, chanting in that mystical tongue, it sounded like she was trying to…expel the anguish and loneliness from her. And it tormented Derek that her words were gibberish to him. The only thing he could glean was that one of the words she had uttered meant "kallum tree."

He could have simply called out to her. Even though he didn't like her, he could have at least offered a shoulder to cry on.

Derek wished he could do that. But he didn't.

He didn't have the courage to comfort her.

He got the sense he had seen something he shouldn't. But he couldn't just leave her there. So he watched over her until she was safely back inside the villa. And when he saw not a trace of a tear on her cheek, he was relieved—at least he was at the time.

But what if it wasn't that she didn't cry…but she *couldn't* cry? It wasn't until after the fact that the thought had struck him.

When Derek returned to the villa that night after Octavia, his father was waiting for him. The moment he realized why his father was waiting, a selfish anger consumed him.

"Father. You knew that Princess Octavia slipped out?"

His father nodded. *"I did."*

"Then why didn't you…?!"

Why did he leave Octavia alone to mourn under the kallum tree? His father could have comforted her well.

"If Her Highness had sought out my help, I would have gladly extended a hand. But I cannot extend a helping hand to her of my own volition."

Derek looked down and shook his head. "Father…you're not making sense."

Why couldn't he help her unless she asked for it? Couldn't he simply make the first move? What was wrong with wanting to comfort her…to rescue her…? As these questions swam through his mind, something struck a nerve.

Why did I just stand and watch…? Why didn't I do anything?

"I am not worthy."

His father's words made Derek look up.

"If I extended a helping hand unprovoked, my commitment to help would only be superficial. I must be committed to live my life for Her Highness, putting her agency first above all else."

"……"

"If I put her first, then I cannot extend a helping hand if she doesn't want it. I can't stand by her side when she needs someone the most, no matter the reason. Superficial kindness and sympathy will only hurt her more."

When faced with two choices, would he always be able to choose Octavia…?

Would he always be able to remain her ally…?

This was indeed difficult for Derek's father. As the Duke of Nightfellow, his top priority was already predetermined. No matter what he wanted to do, he could never make any absolute promises.

Because there was no guarantee that the worst would never happen—

"But, Father!" Derek did not want to accept it.

“As Prince Sirius’s friend…can you make the same commitment?”

Could he—?

Derek wasn’t able to answer.

“But can’t a moment’s kindness or sympathy be a great help to someone?” He asked a question instead of giving an answer because he got the urge to debate it.

“Of course it can. But we can’t use that logic on a prince or princess. Derek…in your heart, you know the truth. That’s why you run from it.”

The words his father said to him that day came back to him—painfully. And the next image that came into his mind was Octavia, her hair adorned with Lieche orchids.

When he was searching for Sil at the junior ball—when he saw Octavia again that night. She hid traces of tears with makeup. But Derek pretended not to notice. He couldn’t bring himself to ask her about it.

“I haven’t changed a bit…,” he muttered self-deprecatingly.

He was the same boy who couldn’t call out to Octavia that night under the kallum tree. He couldn’t ask her why she had been crying. Because Octavia wanted to keep it a secret.

“But, Derek…you need to fix that bad habit of yours. Otherwise, what you truly desire will slip out of your grasp.”

What his father told him that day stirred up painful feelings in him.

“But if I called out to Princess Octavia without commitment, I would hurt her—you said so yourself, Father.”

“I did. Opening the door to the princess’s heart of your own volition—this is only a possibility for those with commitment. Or for those—”

“Or for those who are oblivious.”

He said his father’s words out loud.

When I saw Octavia that night, I was probably oblivious. I could have made my move as an oblivious person.

But if he could go back to that night, not even Derek knew if he would have been able to act differently. After the fact, over and over he wished that it wasn’t he who had encountered Octavia that night but Sirius instead. The Sirius he used to know would have rushed over to his little sister without faltering. Octavia may have been cold to her big brother, but that never deterred him…

Derek rose from his chair and suddenly looked out the window. What were only buds on the kallum tree the day before were now blossoms. Derek pursed his lips as he watched a solitary petal flutter through the night sky.

"*Sakura.*… That's what she called you."

The word had that melody to it. It was the one word he was able to parse from her mumblings. That night, Octavia called the kallum blossoms *sakura*—

The next morning, Derek saw the Octavia he knew—Sirius's bratty little sister. She was no longer clinging onto the kallum tree, drowning in loneliness.

Neither as a small boy nor now as a man did Derek ever see Octavia as a fragile little kitten. But that night, he learned that this was only because she never showed that side of herself to anyone.

"Lord Derek! Your loyal servant, Steyn, has answered your summons!"

When he heard the boisterous voice from the hallway, Derek put a hand to his head and turned around. He gathered his wits about him and answered, "Enter."

Steyn, the adoptive son of Baldo—the duke's right-hand man—entered the room. "Between His Excellency and you, Lord Derek, I *do* feel I am being overworked."

"Oh. Good luck with that."

"You *meanie*! Lord Derek, you absolute *meanie*! So? Why did you call for me?"

"There's a personal matter I'd like investigated. Not a word to my father."

"Um…well, I can investigate it just fine, but I can't keep it from His Excellen—"

"It's a dream mission for a lover of beauty such as yourself. You can surround yourself with a gaggle of beauties. And it won't hurt my father at all."

"Aye-aye, sir! Your servant Steyn shall carry out the mission verily!" Steyn chirped, giving his best imitation of a salute. "So what does the aforementioned investigation entail? Scandal at the castle? Something happen with Prince Sirius or one of his friends?"

Derek supposed he could say there technically was a scandal. But he ignored Steyn's question and gave him the details. "The castle town is

basically your backyard, right? I want you to watch closely over the next few days and follow any bodyguards who set foot in there."

"I'd love to help ya, but *bodyguards* is a bit too broad for me. You'll need to narrow it down a little."

Derek paused for a while before he answered, "Hugh Roberts and Nathan Holden."

Steyn pressed back. "Um, but aren't those Prince Sirius's most trusted bodyguards?"

"You're well-informed."

"My knowledge encompasses all that is beautiful!" Steyn sang, raising his arm with a grand flourish.

Is he being this melodramatic on purpose? Yeah…he probably is. Derek heaved a sigh.

"*Well*, but do you *really* need to investigate them? Even in the worst-case scenario, neither of those boys would harbor treacherous feelings toward Prince Sirius—at least that's *my* read on them!"

"And I agree with you…but that's why I'm asking you to investigate them. Just an investigation, nothing more."

"Hmm… Well, personally, I'd kind of like to know *why* you want to investigate them."

"It's a gut feeling."

"A gut feeling? C'mon, don't give me some bullshit response just because you don't feel like telling me!"

Steyn did not hesitate to voice his discontent. But there was no dishonesty in Derek's words. He was being entirely truthful.

"Do it as soon as possible. Use my name if you need to. Don't hesitate. You'll depart for the castle town tomorrow—and I'll be there for a while, too."

"Oh, Lord Derek, you *are* a master of disguise! Ooh, flower petals?" Steyn pinched one of the pink petals that had fluttered through the open window. "By the way, which is it?" he asked, pinching the petal between his thumb and index finger and waving it side to side.

"What do you mean?"

"This kallum blossom. His Excellency says you hate these flowers, but his wife says you love kallum blossoms more than she ever has."

Derek frowned and didn't answer.

“Eek! Don’t kill me.”

Derek sighed deeply. “Anyway—neither of them is wrong.”

53

“So good to see you, Lord Edgar.” I closed Blackfeather, gripped the hem of my skirt, and curtsied to Edgar. Since he was royalty and my adoptive father, manners were extra important with him! (Just not too grandiose.)

“Good to see you, too. What a lovely morning,” Edgar answered softly—which was nice and all, but then he just kept staring at me…for like, a good ten seconds. Then Edgar nodded in approval. “It’s a relief to see you. Enoch told me how you were doing, but I hadn’t seen you with my own eyes. Then again, you were prohibited from having visitors… Your complexion looks well.”

Oh, geez… So Edgar was barred from visiting me, just like everybody else. Even Father visiting felt like a special exception. And ever since my conversation with Sirius, Sasha was the only maid allowed in my room, too. Not even my chief lady-in-waiting, Matilda, was permitted.

“Thank you,” I answered with a smile. “Yes, I don’t feel even slightly encumbered going about my daily routine.” I showed him by shifting Blackfeather into my left hand, which had healed thanks to the salve and tight bandage. No matter how effective the salve and binding were, my hand still hurt a little when I moved it. But I had my pride—I would tough it out. Had to show everyone how healthy I was!

“As you can see, I’m well enough to go for a walk in the garden. Are you on a walk again this fine morning, Lord Edgar?”

“Again…?” Edgar asked, his eyes blinking behind his spectacles.

The words had just slipped out because spotting him last night on the way to the training grounds had stuck in my memory… But that actually worked out perfectly. Now I could ask him about it.

“Last night, Brother and I walked through the castle grounds, and I happened to see you through a window in the hallway. You were in this garden, yes?”

“Well…” Edgar put a hand to his chin. “So you caught me?” he asked awkwardly. “I was out here without permission. I’d like to keep it from Enoch, if possible.”

That admission hit me like a ton of bricks. “Lord Edgar…were you really out here alone last night? And without Father’s approval?”

I hadn’t even considered my father not knowing. I mean, he’s crazy about Edgar! They never canoodled in public or anything, but if the slightest bit of danger came close to Edgar in his duties, Father would cancel Edgar’s schedule… Or at least he would if he could… Well, he always beefed up security. He was very cautious of Edgar’s safety—too cautious, even.

But it wasn’t like he was overly possessive of Edgar, either… How should I put it…? It was like he was fraught with fear whenever Edgar was out of sight?

And. Yet.

Lord Edgar…how could you go for a walk alone at night without telling Father? Way to put his life in hard mode. If Father found out, he’d go bald from the stress!

Trouble in paradise?

Edgar’s bodyguards also belonged to my father—every last one of them was selected from my father’s pool of bodyguards. They were quality fighters to be sure, but they had the added task of reporting daily to my father whether Edgar was completely safe and sound. This was my grounds for deeming my father a tad overprotective of Edgar.

And in spite of all this, Edgar managed to slip out alone without telling Father. I don’t care how light he was on his feet—how did he escape the watchful eyes of the bodyguards?! Though it was an outing within the castle grounds, somebody should always accompany him.

So how did he do it?

If it was a total solo orchestration, I’m actually impressed! Show me your ways, Lord Edgar! Maybe I could use that to escape Hugh!

But Edgar simply said, “I wasn’t technically alone—I had a bodyguard with me, of course.”

Dang. Guess I jumped the gun…

I knew I shouldn’t be bummed about it, but I was. My secret schemes to meet with Klifford and all sorts of other juicy escapades self-destructed.

And upon closer examination, I could see that even now, Edgar's bodyguard was nearby. Not close enough to overhear our conversation, but close enough to quickly be at his side.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that…"

"Aw, were you worried about me? Thanks." Edgar smiled sweetly.

Such eye candy.

I was once again reminded how Lord Edgar offered another flavor of beauty to the eyes. I know, he's my father's partner. I know, he's my (male) mother! On the surface, we're a big happy family. But I felt absolutely no familial connection to him.

Among my siblings—Alec, Sirius, and myself—the closest to Edgar was Sirius. But even if you ignored the whole superficial family facade we had, it wasn't like Edgar and I had a bad relationship. I had no memories of Edgar being a stereotypical evil stepmother. If anyone filled that role, it would actually be Sirius stans!

Though Edgar was never affectionate with me, he also never tried to force me to be his daughter. Person-to-person, I'd say our relationship wasn't all that bad.

Edgar was…good at gauging personal space. If you exuded a "Stay back!" aura, he would keep a distance. And if you gave him an "I want to talk to you!" aura, he would approach you.

And as a matter of fact, I was currently exuding a "Let's talk!" aura full blast. Or so I thought. I can't exactly see my aura. Well…in spirit, then! All vibes!

I mean, since the list of people I was allowed to see was dreadfully short, this was a valuable opportunity to interact with another person! I was starved for conversation! *O aura, let thy light shine forth!*

"Octavia…would you like to go for a little walk?"

Edgar detected my aura!

"I'd love to. Hugh, follow us at a distance." Don't forget, this guy's spying for Sirius!

"As you command, Princess." Hugh bowed stiffly.

And side by side, Edgar and I walked into the garden.

After turning and looking back at Hugh, who was following at a distance, and his own bodyguard—who followed more closely—Edgar raised an eyebrow and said, “Isn’t Hugh Sirius’s bodyguard?”

I couldn’t blame him for the confusion. Hugh was Sirius’s right-hand man. They were a set pair. You couldn’t have one without the other.

“Brother deemed it necessary for Hugh to be my temporary bodyguard.” I casually emphasized the word *temporary*, as this was an important distinction.

“Oh. So I wasn’t interrupting your date, then.”

He what now?

“I thought that perhaps Hugh might be this secret lover of yours… Too bad. I could have told Enoch about it.”

“Um…Lord Edgar?”

That’s utterly groundless, my guy!

I glared firmly at him in protest. Then Edgar burst out laughing.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.” He laughed. Then he kicked me while I was down. “I’ll wait patiently until the day you formally introduce him to us.”

“Yes…quite… I do hope you are excited about it.” I hid my fake smile with Blackfeather before it could twitch into a frown. I guess what Edgar just said confirmed that the meet-the-parents date was still going down according to schedule.

Excited, my ass… Urrrgh. Since the junior ball was a bust, I’m not even slightly closer to finding a fake boyfriend…

The enemy character from the books is the perfect target! …Or so I’d thought. Once I actually made contact with Rust, I had to remove him from the list of candidates. I just couldn’t broach the subject… Or more like my psyche wouldn’t let me…

And now that I was confined to a limited area, my chances of meeting men had gotten even more abysmal. Whenever I thought about how the clock was ticking, I realized that now was no time to be picky.

Maybe I should just go with Edgar’s theory and say it’s Hugh? I could test the waters and—nope, don’t ask him. I shook that thought right out of my head. It’s just, based off my current standing, it was kinda difficult imagining a future where that went well. Even Rust had a greater probability of success as a fake boyfriend than Hugh.

If only we had the same relationship now as we did in the books, then I'd have an easier time asking him… But then again, if I were like book-Octavia, I wouldn't have made that whole "I love somebody, too!" proclamation in the first place.

At this rate, I wish I could just have a *real* boyfriend…! Especially with romance blossoming all around me! Edgar was a living example of that.

Preach, girl! my inner voice whispered.

He overcame gender and class to marry my father—their royal love story was famous. It almost sounded too good to be true, like somebody was obviously taking some liberties. However…if the story weren't about my own father, my little fujoshi soul would burn with passion over it. Especially the part where Edgar was kidnapped and Father dashed in to rescue him just in the nick of time—if I could have consumed that story in two-dimensional novel form, I would have fangirled my heart out, good sir! If a spin-off series about Enoch had been released in my past life, you bet I would've bought it!

But this wasn't a fantasy novel anymore.

And maybe my father was so overprotective of Edgar because that kidnapping really did happen. He'd developed a fear of losing him. And when you thought about it that way…

I looked up at Edgar as he walked beside me. Since he was a fully grown man, he was taller than me by far. "About your late-night excursion, Lord Edgar… Are you sure you're all right with keeping it from Father?"

Edgar smiled sheepishly. "To be honest, we have an unspoken rule that it's all right for me to walk alone in this garden at night. I just didn't get his permission formally. By the way…Enoch doesn't like this garden."

"Oh…he doesn't?"

But why?

I didn't voice the question. But when Edgar saw the look in my eyes, he quietly answered, "Because…it's the garden that the former king tended to personally."

"You mean Grandfather? Personally?"

My grandfather? The big spender and gem hoarder? When my father was the crown prince, he and Grandfather didn't see eye to eye and often butted heads. Maybe that was why once he handed over the throne to Father, he barely spent any time in the royal capital until his death.

That was my grandfather, the former king. I had visited the castle he lived in after retirement, and it was sparkling with gold and gemstones. That castle transcended opulence and was just one step short of trashy. To be honest, the thought of the old man covered in dirt or crouching by a garden bed…

"Having a hard time imagining it?"

"Yes, sir," I answered honestly.

My grandfather passed away when I was eight years old…and I had heard not-so-great things about him. Like that when he was king, he grabbed any pretty thing he liked and was a rampant playboy… Or that he was an easy mark for merchants… However, all these criticisms of him were about his personal life.

As a king, he did a pretty good job. At the very least, he didn't endanger the kingdom. My father opposed everything he did, though.

My grandfather…

One thing I'd never considered from my grandfather's perspective was his relationship with his elder brother, Duke Kihlgren. Duke Kihlgren died of old age. Generally, male monarchs lived long lives if they were uneventful.

There was an accurate painting of my grandfather displayed in the castle that I knew well. I pictured it in my mind. My impression of my grandfather in life was that he was a decadent, shallow person. I remember getting the sense that he tried to bury his shortcomings in luxuries.

I also got the feeling he didn't care a bit about his grandchildren—me, Sirius, and Alec. But as we were all royalty, I guess you could say he treated us all rather equitably.

So that begs the question…

"Lord Edgar…what kind of man was Grandfather?"

"What kind of man…?" Edgar stopped in his tracks, staring blankly out into the garden. Then he reached for a lone Lieche orchid. "He was fragile…and very kind. I think that's why he planted these flowers here."

"The Lieche orchids?"

My grandfather planted them? I followed Edgar's gaze around the garden painted in white. At the beautiful white blooms with the lovely scent. *Come to think of it, this is the only garden at the castle with so many Lieche orchids. Tucked away…*

Was it because—these flowers were beloved by Queen Idéalia? Because these flowers represented a history the royal family wanted to keep hidden?

Then—

"So Lieche orchids weren't grown at the castle before my grandfather's era. I never knew that."

Fragile. Kind.

What if my grandfather wanted to give these flowers a place at the castle…even if they couldn't be planted on a large scale? Then I could see a side to him that fit Edgar's description. The Lieche orchids blooming in this garden were the former king's attempt at a memorial to the queen buried by history.

"Lord Edgar—"

Does he know about Queen Idéalia? No…even if he did know, I don't think he would have heard about her from my father. Then…from my grandfather? I don't have any grounds to ask him, though…

"I can tell you liked Grandfather."

Edgar chuckled. "Yes, unlike Enoch." His gaze softened. "Well, he was softhearted. He had a great deal of sympathy."

The words *for me* were left unspoken. I got the sense from Edgar's tone that my grandfather's sympathy was for the peasant and merchant who married the king…and also that it *wasn't* for him.

And knowledgeable as I was, neither my grandfather's thoughts nor Edgar's relationship with my father were written in the books.

I reached out to the white Lieche orchids—

"Last night…"

My fingers stopped in midair. I turned to look at Edgar.

"I was having nightmares." Edgar cradled the Lieche orchids to his chest like a treasure and nuzzled his nose to them. "And the scent of these flowers quiets my mind."

Nightmares… I knew them well. Terribly well. And I couldn't confide in anyone.

But Edgar had somebody who was there for him.

"But you have my father on your side, Lord Edgar. Why don't you tell him about your nightmares?"

A breeze blew past, sending my hair flying. I held down the tendrils.

And right beside me, I heard a whisper. “Tell Enoch…?” There was a faint smile carved in Edgar’s upturned face.

What is this…strange sensation I feel?

For an instant, in his voice…and in his eyes…I felt a shadow fall.

The smile lingering on his lips, Edgar continued, “I don’t think I can tell Enoch what happens in my nightmares.”

“Why can’t you tell him?”

“Because I don’t want to. Besides, Enoch could do nothing about it anyway.” His voice was not even slightly loud. But the strength of affirmation in Edgar’s tone disturbed me. Silence flowed between us for many seconds. And it was Edgar who finally broke it. “Sorry…I must have frightened you.” He sighed and smirked. “You’re a good listener, Octavia. You make me say things I shouldn’t…”

The Edgar I knew had returned. He pressed a finger to his lips and said, “So I’d appreciate it if you kept this a secret from Enoch.”

“Well, I…” A frown formed on my face. I couldn’t just say yes.

Is Edgar struggling with something? He says he can’t tell my father about it…but I get the feeling he should.

“Now, Octavia—I take it something is troubling you?”

Whoa!

“If you want, I’ll do what I can to help.”

Behold…I see a hook and line.

It was times like this that I really realized Edgar was a former salesman. And parentage aside, he was Esfia’s second-in-command. Not even Sirius could oppose him openly—this part was key!

If Alec were here, that would be another story, but since he was gone, if I had any hope of breaking out of the cage I was in, Edgar was my best potential savior at the castle by far. What’s more, Edgar had just hinted to me that if I kept his secret from Father, he would help me with something. And the secret he wanted me to keep was something personal.

There’s no way I couldn’t pounce on his offer…

“Lord Edgar.” I shut my fan and gazed directly into Edgar’s brown eyes.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot accept your offer.”

“Was the deal not sweet enough for you?”

I shook my head. “Not that at all. I just cannot promise to keep a secret from my father. Lord Edgar, if you know why you have those nightmares—if it has anything to do with my father, then you need to talk to him.”

Edgar stared at me in disbelief for a little while…then he chuckled, his eyes crinkling behind his spectacles. “I see. So that’s your move, Octavia.”

Indeed it is!

There’s no way I couldn’t pounce on his offer! But still…

As a longtime sufferer of nightmares and as Edgar’s friend (which I decided I was just now!), I couldn’t jump at the opportunity. Even if it meant Edgar would no longer help me with my own problem.

It was similar to the carriage ride to the junior ball, when Sil asked me to keep a secret from Sirius. But I already knew from reading the books that Sil’s problem with Sirius would resolve on its own.

But Edgar’s problem with my father was completely different.

Maybe I was meddling? Well, regardless, something needed to change. I mean, this is the sort of thing that always comes back to bite you in the ass later. It’s like a virus! Like a lit fuse that you forget about, and it eventually explodes! Well, I can’t help Edgar light that fuse!

“I understand, Octavia… And I don’t want to force you to help me.”

“I guess this means the deal’s off?”

“No…half of it went through.”

…..Huh?

“Even if there’s no deal and I have nothing to gain from the exchange…I want to help you anyway, Octavia.” With sincerity and goodwill, Edgar smiled.

54

Victory bells were ringing in my ears. I didn’t know how or why, but Edgar was going to help me! No way could I politely decline *this* offer!

Step one: exchange notes! I told Edgar everything that happened after I got back from the junior ball—except for what my father had said about Duke Kihlgren. I even heard Edgar mutter, “Enoch must’ve left something out,” in the middle of my spiel.

Then I told him how I had recently weaseled garden-walking privileges from Sirius, and lastly, I got to the heart of the matter and begged him to say something to rein Sirius in. I wasn't sure at first how Edgar could help me, but I knew Sirius would listen to Edgar, if no one else.

Please, unleash the powers of Esfia's second-in-command against my brother!

After I'd finished pleading my case, Edgar's dark brown eyes darkened deeper. He seemed to be mulling it over. Then he finally said, "I don't mind having a talk with him."

Victory bells rang again. This time with a flurry of golden confetti.

But.

"However, I doubt I can change Sirius's mind."

Edgar's eyes were emotionless. *Dun dun dun.* The bells sounded more like a death knell now.

"I could put a word in and solve any number of problems, but not this one… Alderton's name must be cleared first."

At first, Edgar's tone sounded so matter-of-fact that his words almost didn't register.

Because I recognized that tone.

"Lord Edgar—do you believe Klifford is innocent?"

"I don't know your bodyguard very well, Octavia. I'm merely giving him deference since you let him vow in your name. Besides, if I'm going to help you, I'll need you on my side."

"This might mean opposing my father…"

"Personally, I think Enoch is neutral on the matter. And I don't think it's a bad thing, opposing him now and then. It won't hurt our relationship."

Even if Edgar was struggling with a problem he couldn't tell Father about, the way he could speak with such casual conviction…that was pretty badass.

"Shall we make a list?" Edgar outlined each of my requests one by one. "First, you want Alderton's…your bodyguard's release. You want to lift the restrictions on your movement and visitors. You want to resume your duties—you were supposed to go survey the castle town the day after tomorrow, I remember. No, wait, I think I heard that survey was reassigned to Sirius…"

"My brother is taking over the survey? But ordinarily—"

"Postponing your survey would be proper."

Indeed it would be! If I wasn't allowed to perform the survey, I just assumed it would be postponed… But give it to my brother instead? That's news to me, good sir!

My sweet survey…I'm not giving up on you! My dreams are riding on that castle town survey! Even though it's technically work, it's fun for me—I get to have a taste of city life again.

I needed answers.

I turned around. The perfect person at which to hurl my inquiry was on standby not too far from me. It was the bodyguard with black hair—Hugh Roberts.

"You summoned me, Princess?" Hugh Roberts bowed before me.

"At ease. I have an inquiry for you. Lord Edgar just told me that my survey will now be conducted by my brother—is this true?"

Hugh glanced at Edgar. Undaunted, Edgar smiled back. "I'd like to get the record straight as well. If I misremembered, that would mean I lied to Octavia."

A boost from Esfia's second-in-command works instantly!

Hugh looked down and answered reluctantly, "Yes…it was decided that Prince Sirius will be conducting the survey."

"And wouldn't it have been proper to let me have a say in that decision?"

I'd already made all sorts of arrangements and preparations! Like which shops I was gonna go to! I return to the castle ready to pass out every survey—I'm just that hardcore! I always give it 120 percent!

And besides…

"I'm sure you're aware that my brother and I conduct different types of surveys? Ordinarily, it would be acceptable to reschedule."

Princes and princesses had different duties. A prince subbing for another prince was understandable. Sirius could take Alec's survey, and vice versa. But fundamentally, neither Sirius nor Alec was a suitable substitute for me. Well, of course there were exceptions, like emergencies and such. But those exceptions never applied to surveys. That's why they were scheduled with flexibility in mind.

So it was weird that they didn't just postpone my survey!

“Unless there’s some *reason* it couldn’t be postponed?”

“…!”

Dang, I’m on fire today! I’d asked purely because I felt like complaining, but it hit Hugh hard. The hint of a reaction that Hugh tried to hide couldn’t escape my keen eye.

“So there *was* a reason.”

Hugh remained silent. If I kept poking him long enough, he was sure to cave.

“Now, for what reason was my survey reassigned to my brother?”

Silence.

Hmm… My Princess Privilege hath stalled.

Hugh refused to speak. He really was Sirius’s right-hand man. He would never betray my brother.

I stared at Hugh long and hard. *Maybe with the power of my death glare, I—. Nope, nothing’s happening.*

Unless there was a fissure in their friendship, I wouldn’t be able to get a leg in… Sirius’s trust in Hugh was absolute. *That* was why he’d assigned him as my bodyguard. What’s more, it wasn’t just a gentleman’s agreement. He’d sent a formal decree first thing in the morning that read: *I decree that my bodyguard Hugh shall be Octavia’s temporary bodyguard.*

Bodyguard.…… Hugh swore fealty to Sirius…

Suddenly, it was as if a light bulb lit up in my brain.

I think I can use this.

I’m still on fire today. Behold! A way to capture Hugh!

It was sophistic. However, I used my status as princess to enhance my sophistry—

After all, convincing reasoning is all about spice!

“Hugh Roberts. At the very least, *at present*, you are serving as *my* bodyguard. By the command of my brother, no less. Do you object?”

“No.”

“Then do you mean to ignore my brother’s command?”

A shade of doubt appeared in Hugh’s jet-black eyes. Hugh would never ignore a command. I knew that.

“If you wish to carry out my *brother’s* command, then you must serve *me* as my bodyguard. You must serve me to serve my brother. I cannot abide entrusting my safety to someone who doesn’t take his orders seriously.”

If you're going to be my bodyguard, then I demand equal treatment!

There was probably nothing wrong with his work itself—it was the *treatment*! I won't ask him to prioritize me over Sirius, but at least put us on equal footing! Like, by answering my questions honestly! Like that!

"Consider that my question bears the equal weight of one from my brother. So. Whom do you serve *right now*?"

"I serve…you, Princess Octavia."

"Yes. Quite right." I lifted my chin. It was time to strike again. "Why was my brother assigned my survey?"

I waited on pins and needles. If Hugh declined to answer, we'd have a stalemate.

Hugh's lips parted. "The anti-royalists' plot… It wasn't just one phase. We discovered that they were planning on attacking when you were on your survey."

Hell yeaaaah—wait, no! Another attack?

"When and where did you get this information?"

"The first report came the day of the junior ball. While I was on a mission for Prince Sirius regarding another matter."

"Another matter… Was this the mission during which your tassel was cut by an enemy?"

Hugh silently nodded.

I opened Blackfeather, soothing my soul with its fluff as I perused *The Noble King* lore in my brain. An arc where Octavia was targeted by anti-royalists while out on survey—never happened. It did happen to Sirius when he was in the castle town. But that threat was crushed long ago, because I'd dropped a hint to Sirius about it. I mean, I had to—Sil's life was in danger.

"You mentioned a first report… Surely there's a second report?"

"We received a corroborating report from the traitors Duke Nightfellow captured at the junior ball."

"Might these traitors have canceled the survey attack and switched it to the junior ball instead?"

Hugh shook his head. "Though its origins were likely the same, we believe that plan was carried out by a separate force—for insurance."

So the survey attack was their backup plan, in case the junior ball raid failed? Guess that means it's inseparable from the junior ball raid… Well,

now it's crystal clear why Sirius is doing the survey.

"Sirius aims to have the traitors carry out their survey attack, doesn't he?"

Makes sense. If the survey were postponed, they might escape.

"Just as you did at the junior ball, while on survey, Prince Sirius intends to use himself as bait."

"But would they take the bait if it's him? The traitors planned their attack on the day of my survey. *I* am their target."

"The anti-royalists perceive all the royal family as their target. This includes Prince Sirius."

The royal family is their target… So I guess the assailants have a deeper connection to the anti-royalists who attacked me in the garden at Paradise in the Sky?

"Just to be sure, Lord Sil is *not* a target this time, correct?"

Since I read the books, I just couldn't shake the bad feeling I had. Crushing that one threat might have triggered another one I know of… *Well, unless Sirius takes Sil with him on the survey, the pieces won't all be in place for that death flag. It's supposed to happen when Sirius and Sil are in the castle town together. And Sirius would never take Sil with him on a survey when his mission is to bait the enemy.*

"Prince Sirius is doing his best to ensure that."

So…is he a target or isn't he? Hugh's answer was way too vague.

Wait a minute, shouldn't I wonder why he worded his answer that way? What if—?

"Does my brother believe Klifford is also involved in this plot?"

"That intelligence is outside my purview."

Hugh evaded the question. But this only made me more confident in my theory. Sirius probably suspected that Klifford (whom he thinks tampered with Sil's carriage) was connected to the plot to attack me during my survey. That explained why Klifford was confined now, and of course that meant he would stay confined on the survey day. Could we just assume he suspected Klifford from every angle?

I wanted to grab Sirius by his scruff, shake him, and yell, "*Why do you have to be like that?!*" I know that once you suspect someone, it's easy to take your suspicions as fact… But how was I supposed to prove Klifford's innocence outside of court without the real culprit caught—?

Aha!

I snapped Blackfeather shut. Then I turned to Edgar, who had been listening to my conversation with Hugh. “Lord Edgar.”

“Hmm?”

“Lend me your ear.”

Edgar crouched down to my level, and I whispered in his ear my brilliant plan to prove Klifford’s innocence.

Okay, that’s a lie. It could barely be called brilliant.

I’ll call it: Operation If You Suspect Klifford, Catch Him in the Act.

For the castle town survey, I would go as originally planned—and Sirius would come with me. We would both be traitor bait. But Klifford would also come with us. And surveillance on him would be reduced.

Then, when the traitors attacked me and Sirius according to plan, Sirius could see for himself whether or not Klifford did anything questionable. If he really was guilty, he would make a move if we gave him the perfect conditions for it. I explained to Edgar that since Sirius suspected Klifford, it would be the perfect opportunity for my brother to catch him red-handed. I would propose this plan to Sirius as soon as possible.

“However, there’s no guarantee my brother will agree to the plan. So, Lord Edgar, I want you to use your influence to make him say yes. If he won’t budge, then convince him.”

“I certainly wouldn’t say your plan is modest… Sorry, but I can’t cooperate,” Edgar whispered, a deep crease between his brows.

Wha—?! You mean I have to budge Edgar before Sirius?

“Your plan will put you in just as much danger as the junior ball.”

“But this is the best method for resolving everything in one fell swoop.”

The thought of being bait did scare me, but I’d already experienced it unknowingly at the junior ball. And as long as Klifford was with me, I’d be fine. I knew I would never get hurt. Klifford wouldn’t make any questionable moves either, of course.

At the very least, that would prove he was in no way connected to the survey attack. Then if we captured some of the traitors and got them to confess their plan in detail—during which Klifford’s name would definitely not come up—it would be the breakthrough I needed to chip away at my brother’s rigid distrust of Klifford. I had a feeling that would, in turn, smash his distrust to pieces. I would see to that.

As long as Sirius didn’t shoot down my suggestion, victory was in reach. All I needed to do was wait two days until the survey. And even if the attack didn’t wind up happening, that wouldn’t make the situation any worse.

A heavy sigh escaped Edgar’s mouth. “You seem determined.” He picked a lone Lieche orchid from the blooms in his arms.

I stared, wondering what he was doing. And the moment I understood what it was, I recoiled without meaning to. Edgar froze, holding the white flower in the air just inches away from where he was about to place it in my hair.

“……”

“……”

After an awkward silence, Edgar smiled sheepishly. “My apologies. I forgot that royalty doesn’t put flowers in their hair. Sorry I offended you—”

I quickly shook my head. “No, I wasn’t offended… Lord Edgar, you were blessing me with good fortune, were you not?”

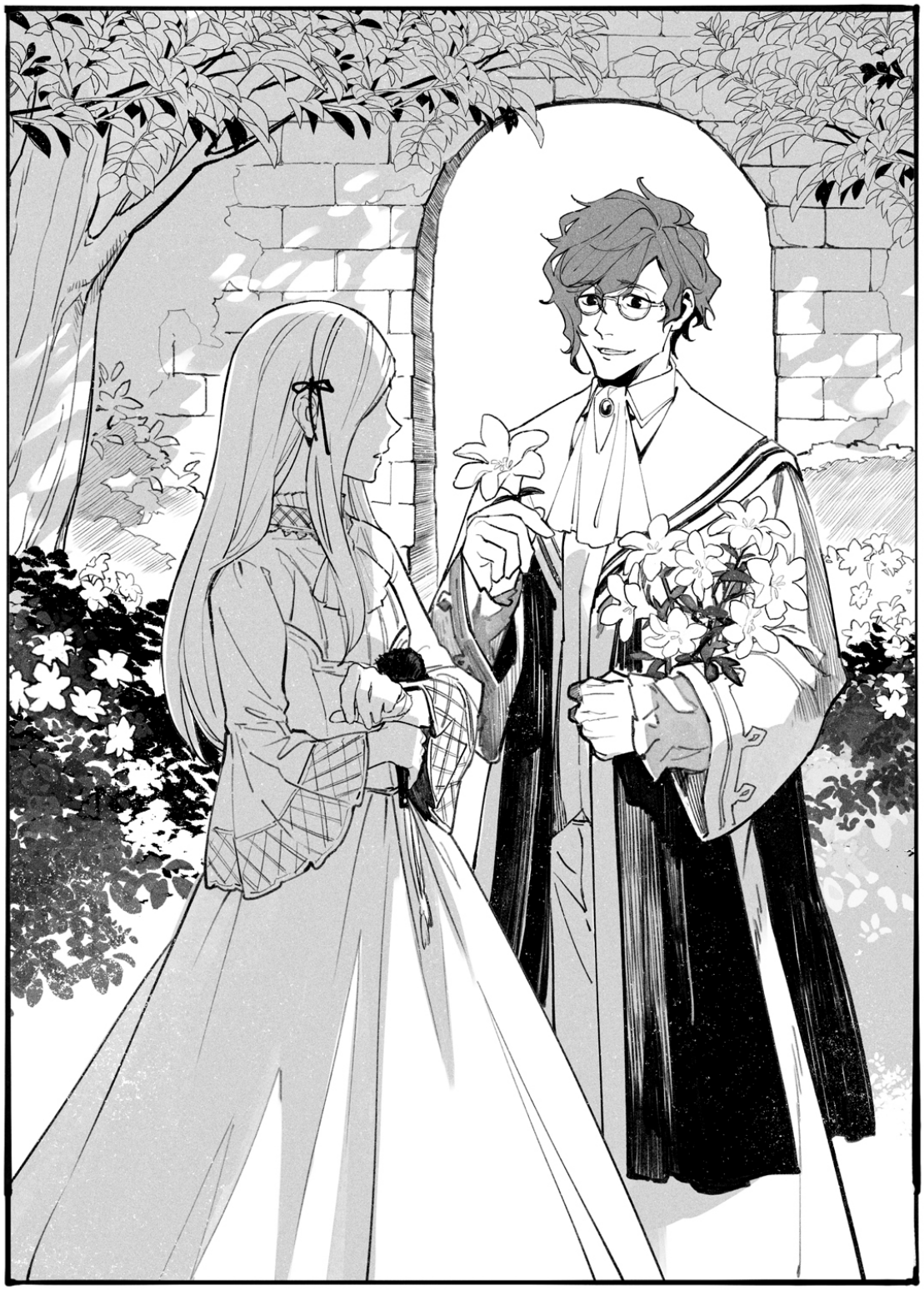
I was incredibly grateful for the gesture. But I backed away from him because—

Huh? Why did *I back away?*

Well, whatever, I just need to make sure Edgar knows I’m not offended!

“Since I wore Lieche orchids in my hair during the latter half of the junior ball, I know the meaning behind wearing flowers in the hair. Believe me, I was not at all disturbed by the gesture!”

My heartfelt plea changed the look in Edgar’s eyes. “Ah, so you’ve already worn flowers in your hair. I didn’t know that… By the way, you mentioned *good fortune*. What exactly do you know about the custom?”



“That among the peasantry, if a man puts flowers in a lady’s hair, she will be blessed with good fortune.”

“Yes, that’s right. So this person who put flowers in your hair at the junior ball… Was it a man?”

“Yes…”

It was Klifford both the first and second time.

Edgar smiled softly, a look of understanding in his eyes.

Er, why? What brought about this glint of understanding?

“Then it was my fault for not showing enough restraint. I’m sure you want nobody to put flowers in your hair but him. I’m sorry.”

“You…misunderstand, Lord Edgar.”

“Oh?”

I wanted to punch that teasing smirk off his face.

“But your reaction was exactly the same as someone else I know…” With a little chuckle, Edgar continued, “*‘Once you give your heart to someone, you’ll only want the gesture from him. No substitutes. Besides, it’s a real disappointment having my big brother put flowers in my hair!’* That’s what she said on the day of her engagement—”

His words, so full of tenderness and nostalgia, cut off abruptly. The look on his face showed he had said something he shouldn’t have.

“Whenever I talk to you, Octavia, I really do forget myself…” He sighed, a bitter smile on his lips.

To smooth things over, Edgar further explained the symbolism behind flowers in the hair. Originally, the custom of putting flowers in the hair began with family. Fathers and brothers put flowers in the hair of their daughters and sisters when they were to be married and leave home so that they could be blessed with good fortune.

The custom spread until it changed from a familial practice to simply one between men and women. It was used among families as a sort of good-luck charm—like a flower in your daughter’s hair to help her pass a difficult exam—and it was also used by men to profess their love or to propose to the women they loved.

So between that story Edgar started to tell earlier and his explanation now— Was that story about his little sister?

“Lord Edgar—” I stopped myself when I noticed Edgar’s defensive stance.

What was I even trying to say?

"Would you please put a Lieche orchid in my hair?" I took a step closer to Edgar.

"But, Octavia…"

"The man who put flowers in my hair at the junior ball… I can't meet with him freely. But I want good fortune. And if you put the flowers in my hair, Lord Edgar, nobody would misinterpret it. After all, you're standing right in front of me."

Edgar stood there for a moment…then the tension melted from his shoulders.

He threaded the white bloom into my hair and said the magic words: "May you be blessed with good fortune."

Edgar was probably seeing someone else in me. Someone who wouldn't let him put flowers in her hair.

One thing was clear. Edgar had a little sister—a sister so close that he wanted to give her a special blessing for her wedding. And yet when Edgar married the king, only his parents had attended.

"Do you feel upset?"

I softly touched the Lieche orchid he'd just put in my hair. "No—"

I could never feel upset. My heart felt warm…yet a little melancholic… It was a bittersweet nostalgia. I was just a little apprehensive. At the junior ball, Klifford was by my side the whole time. But now that I was alone, I was scared that the trauma from my shitty haunting memory would change me.

Maybe that was why I recoiled at first…because I didn't like that the person about to put a flower in my hair was not Klifford.

Yes, it definitely hurt having flashbacks of my past life, where my sister and I would put flowers in each other's hair. But I was going to be okay…

"I love the flower, Lord Edgar. Thank you so much." I smiled at Edgar. The Maki inside me was smiling, too.

Maybe I should ask Sasha to put flowers in my hair from now on whenever I want to dress up…

"Octavia—" But Edgar stopped midsentence and smiled softly.

Uh-oh, was I smiling too hard? So hard it looked weird?

"I'm glad you're happy… But don't try too hard to please."

"What do you mean?"

“There’s someone else you’d rather have put flowers in your hair. Here you go—” Edgar picked several orchids from his bundle and handed them to me. And in that moment, an unabashed question popped into my mind. So I asked it, with extreme vulnerability.

“Does the number of blooms in the hair increase the amount of good fortune a lady receives?”

I’m the superstitious type! If a couple more flowers gave me an auspicious boost, you’d better believe I’d tack ’em on!

Edgar burst out laughing. “Could be. Though you’ll need to have somebody put those flowers in your hair to see.”

True story… It doesn’t work if I put them in my own hair. If I had to ask somebody… Klifford’s face was the first to pop into my mind. If he weren’t in confinement, maybe I would have asked him.

“Someone else also asked me a similar question…,” Edgar murmured in the quietest voice I’d ever heard. “Before they wither and die, you should have him put these flowers in your hair. God knows I picked far too many without a purpose…and I had no use for them anyway.”

Edgar offered the rest of the Lieche orchids to me. When he said he’d picked them all without a purpose and that he had no use for them, I knew he was lying. It was obvious.

He had probably picked each bloom with painstaking care.

With such incredible tenderness.

No way had he picked them without purpose.

But Edgar had lied intentionally—and I couldn’t bring myself to contradict him.

I reached out and accepted the flowers.

“Don’t worry, I’ll convince Sirius to carry out your plan.” Edgar smiled softly. “May you be blessed with good fortune…and promise me you’ll come back home safe, you hear?”

55

When a man places flowers in a lady’s hair, she is blessed with good fortune —

One of the handmaids who knew the origins of that custom—she was Sasha's junior—had helped me change dresses when I wanted to put on something formal to boost my morale. She was my new handmaid, Mira. When she was putting the rest of the Lieche orchids from Edgar in a vase, the flower custom came up in conversation.

And from Mira's story, I determined that the flower custom was quite effective!

Mira had burst through the maid selection exams with flying colors, and before the exams, her big brother had given her a pep talk in the form of flowers in her hair. What's more, all the common-born maids in Mira's circle who received hair flowers from their families had a 100 percent admission rate!

Well…now I just *had* to do it!

I kept the Lieche orchid from Edgar in my hair—I needed all the good fortune I could get!

For, behold—

"Good to see you, Octavia."

"Thank you for the invitation, Brother." I curtsied to my brother.

—I was in my brother's room!

A half day had passed since I'd delivered my plan to catch Klifford red-handed to Sirius. And during that half day, my father made an urgent announcement to the people of Esfia that the true crown had been discovered in the Sky Chamber. It was a big spectacle, but I had spent the occasion in my room. I had received a notice that such an event would take place, but I was not allowed to attend.

But I wasn't the only one left out this time. Neither Sirius nor Edgar attended. By my father's wishes, my father would be the sole member of the royal family in attendance at the ceremony.

After I'd eaten my supper alone and Matilda, who had a free moment, was catching me up on the grand spectacle, I received a reply from Sirius. He told me to meet him in his room. As in, he wanted us to talk face-to-face.

In other words, it was do or die! I had to bring my A game so that my plan wouldn't be shot down before it had a chance to fly.

So it was time to dress for battle!

My formal dress was—well, it was quite similar to my casual dress, but I chose one with a more mature design and color scheme! It was a stylish dress that showed a little skin, but not too much to interfere with its sophisticated dark blue color. It was trimmed with lace.

And naturally, this princess was armed with Blackfeather for her protection!

When he saw me enter his private quarters, Sirius looked like he wanted to say something. His aquamarine eyes were clearly drawn to the Lieche orchid in my hair.

I guess I should get the ball rolling.

I touched my flower and broke the ice. “Do you know about Lieche orchids, Brother? Lord Edgar was kind enough to place this one in my hair earlier this morning.”

“Did he now?” Sirius looked perplexed.

I asked, “Is it odd?”

Sirius shook his head. “No…not odd. And I can tell you like it.”

I know, right?!

“Yes, enough to keep it in my hair for this long.” I smiled, and it wasn’t even a Princess Smile.

I wanna start a big flower-in-the-hair trend with the nobility! Sure, some of them will balk at the wreven feather merch, but flowers are a much easier sell!

“Sit…make yourself more comfortable.”

“Well, don’t mind if I do.”

I hope this doesn’t take too long…

I obediently sat down. The long, comfortable royal chaises were just the right size and firmness for a nap. I’m sure plenty of princes in Esfia’s history used them for sexy times, too…

Oh, right! I remember reading in one of my ancestors’ diaries—

…!

No…not on *this* chaise?

Nononono, don’t go there. My little fujoshi heart can’t fangirl over three-dimensional family members. If only it were two-dimensional, I’d give it rave reviews…

If only somebody here wrote BL novels and had them published—I’d happily buy them! If such a cultural phenomenon took off, I’d happily be a

patron…but alas!

I shoved those carnal desires into a corner of my mind and looked at Sirius. He was pouring hot tea from a ceramic teapot into our cups. Esfia's specialty tea was black. I watched as the amber water flowed into the teacups.

I can see it with my own eyes…but better be safe than sorry.

"Did you brew this tea yourself, Brother?"

"Yes?"

I sensed an unvoiced "*You've got a problem with that?*" at the end of his question.

I didn't…but I did.

Well, I guess I should just drink it… Just drink it…

Turning down the tea would be bad, under the circumstances.

As I mustered up my courage and sat waiting for my tea, I felt so antsy that it took all my concentration not to fidget. When we were kids, Sirius had lured me into this room many times with candy, but now that we were grown up, my visitations here had all but ended. Whenever we had business to tend to, I'd see him in his study.

Sirius's room had elegant vibes. It was also utilitarian—to a fault. It was so utilitarian that there was an icy-cold draft to it. An unnerving draft?

Well, I was unnerved. But I had the good fortune of my flowers… *No, let's call it what it really is. I have Edgar's protection!*

When I let myself actually have that thought, I calmed down a bit. I felt comfortable enough now that I could observe the room a little.

As far as I could see, there was no bodyguard in his room. They were all standing out in the hallway, I'm sure. Sirius must have ordered them to. My temporary bodyguard, Hugh, was also not in the room. He had been with me on the way here, but he was waiting in the hall now.

"I suppose this is the sort of conversation that needs to take place entirely in private."

Sirius, a teacup in each hand, set one of them in front of me. "Well, this is about your secret strategy."

Sirius sat opposite me, crossed his legs, and brought his teacup to his lips. I scrutinized every little movement.

Okay…he's drinking it just fine. I'm sure it's not like before…

As they say, hunger is the best spice.

Please be palatable just this once! I require thy sweet moisture for my throat that I may speak!

I mustered up my wits and took a tentative sip to wet my parched throat.

Then my jaw dropped.

This! Is! So! Good!

It was way better than the tea I've made!

And back when we were kids, his tea tasted so shitty that I wondered if it was a prank!

This was an unexpected Achilles' heel the source material never wrote about Superfine Specimen Sirius—he was disastrously bad at making tea.

Even though I was eighteen years old on the inside, it was a struggle maintaining my poker face all those years… But his ineptitude for tea had done a complete one-eighty, and now his tea was…delicious? What sorcery made *that* glow up happen?

"Brother…" As he sat there, staring at me with an indescribable look on his face, I commented on the tea. "You've improved at brewing tea, I see…"

You blew me away!

"*That's* what you had on your mind?" Sirius frowned, scoffing at my heartfelt praise.

"I never told you so in the past, but I shall tell you now—to put it *charitably*, the tea you used to make was, um…"

Even Derek disappeared into the ether whenever he sensed Sirius had a teapot in hand! If Sirius had only drunk his own tea back then, he might have noticed. But he was the sort of host who wanted to serve his guests tea that he had brewed himself, while he drank tea that was prepared by someone else. That meant he never drank his own tea.

"Yeah… From the dead look in your eyes when you drank it, I couldn't help but notice. So I grabbed as many people as I could to teach me how to make tea and…hmm?" He trailed off, a confused look in his eyes. He pressed his fingers to his temple and shook his head. Then he sighed. "Sorry…that was irrelevant."

"It's all right…"

I felt conflicted, knowing that he had done all that for my sake. But there was something else…

The way he reacted… It's just like when he was in my room…

So it's true… His memory has been tampered with…

"Let's get to the matter at hand." Sirius's voice had a sharp edge to it. As did his eyes. "I've received your request regarding the survey… And Lord Edgar has spoken to me as well."

"Then all that remains is your decision, Brother." I took another sip of tea, then set my teacup down. It really was delicious. I also loved that he'd made mine milk tea. I was quite familiar with it since I sometimes had Sasha bring me a cup at bedtime. "I want to capture these traitors just as badly as you do."

Sirius tiredly ran his fingers through his hair and leaned back into his seat. "Even if I were to approve your request—I could not allow Klifford Alderton to be reinstated as your bodyguard the day of the survey."

"But I—" I was interrupted by the soft sound of something opening and closing. I looked in its direction and saw that it had been the door.

"Sirius…?"

As he called out, a man with dark indigo hair—Sil Burks—stepped through the doorway. He might have just gotten out of bed. His hazel eyes looked dazed…then they opened wide, and Sil cried out, "Princess Octavia!"

"Lord Sil!"

Sil's eyes lit up as he ran over to me. And the sight of Sil conscious and well made me so happy that I jumped up and ran toward him.

Technically, not much time had passed, but it was our big reunion after that epic showdown! We opened our arms wide to embrace—but Sil snapped out of it and lowered his arms before he reached me.

Oops, now it's awkward, and I don't know what to do with my arms…

Do something.

Indifferently, I picked up Blackfeather and opened it.

I suppose Sil thought we were being too friendly. Well, I guess it checks out when you take into account what our relationship was like before the junior ball… No, no, I was totally in the right! Gimme my Reunited Sil Hug!

But Sirius is staring daggers at me… As a proper lady, though he be my brother's lover, I hath seen the error in my ways in attempting to embrace him. Indeed.

"Sil… Octavia…"

I stole a glance at Sirius. Then I quickly looked back at Sil.

I shouldn't have looked.

"Since when do you two hug?"

He was glaring more than daggers at me now.

56

Jealousy is beautiful. Illustrations inspired by possessive envy are very nice things indeed.

As a fan of *The Noble King*, I honestly loved it whenever Sirius acted with animosity toward other men (and even animals) if Sil was friendly with them. Ooh, *mee-yowww*.Actually, even outside *The Noble King*, I could grin and give a sexy growl (though not within earshot of anybody).

However!

Now that I'm on the receiving end of that jealousy, I know the truth. The truth behind this possessiveness that I so hungrily devoured when it was a work of fiction. When it's real, jealousy is quite a pain in the ass!

"I didn't think you two were so friendly." Sirius's words, and his gaze—sharp, jealous death rays—stabbed into me. When you're caught being the *other woman* (sorta?), anything you say in a situation like this will only make things worse.

I feigned calmness behind Blackfeather as I tried to think of a countermeasure…and during those short two seconds, I had the sense his jealous death rays had gotten just a *tad* stronger.

"Oh, but we aren't friendly."

I had no time to think. So I denied everything to save my hide from the crime of attempted hug of the first degree.

Then Sil, who was still facing me, looked down slightly. He appeared sad. I could practically see his droopy puppy ears and tail!

Aah, I'm so sorry! Forgive me, Lord Sil!

"However…"

L-let's at least help him save face!

"…Lord Sil and I survived a traumatic experience together at the junior ball when we were both targeted by those traitors. It is only natural that we

should be happy to see each other alive and well."

And it wouldn't at all be weird for us to express that happiness with attempted hug of the first degree. No sirree.

"Isn't that right, Lord Sil?"

Sil blinked a couple times, then a smile popped onto his face. "Yes, Princess!" he answered eagerly. I beamed back at him.

Awww, are we having a moment?

"Sil—," Sirius called to him. His jealous death rays were no longer flying, but his expression was stiff. "We need to talk after this."

"If you want to talk about what happened at the junior ball, since Princess Octavia is here, now would be—"

"No. About a personal matter."

"Oh…understood."

A personal matter…between lovers, I suppose?

Under different circumstances, I'd want to buzz off and give them some privacy. But I still hadn't settled negotiations with Sirius yet… And I'd love to get Sil alone—not happening, of course—and ask him about what was going on in his mind when he was in that trance in the Sky Chamber.

And naturally, I had ulterior motives, too. If I got Sil on my side, I could sweet-talk Sirius into anything.

So I shall stand my ground until my ends are achieved!

"Dear Brother, perhaps Lord Sil should have some tea? I'll gladly pour if you wish it."

"No…I'll pour." Sirius rose and walked over to the teapot. I was in the mood to serve Sil tea myself, but he shot me down!

Oh well, worth a try.

"Lord Sil, won't you have a seat with me?" I asked. Even though Sirius was the master of this room, he didn't seem to mind my asking. Of course we were on the same page that Sil shouldn't be left standing! I returned to the chaise and sat, and Sil followed suit.

After a while, Sirius set Sil's teacup on the table. Then he sat across from me—next to Sil. I think all of us had a different kind of tea. Mine was milk tea, Sirius's was plain, and Sil's was also plain but a lighter color. Maybe it was a different blend? If so, it had to be Sil's favorite.

I'm impressed—the man clearly knows his tea!

It was still hard to believe Sirius was practically a tea pro, given his history.

After staring intensely at Sil…or rather, at the tea he was sipping, I took a sip of my own milk tea. And as I was reveling in how delicious it was, Sil spoke up.

"…Princess Octavia?"

"Oh, pardon me. I was just surprised by my brother's tea. I truly could have mistaken it for somebody else's."

"Is it really that surprising?" Sirius asked curtly, taking a sip from his own cup.

And then Sil cried out, "Ohhh!" as if to say, "*I know what she's talking about!*"

"I heard about your tea. From Derek…"

"Derek?" Sirius shot him a look as if to say, "*Why are you bringing up Derek?*"

I was also curious. So I prompted, "Lord Sil?" as if to say, "*Tell me everything you know*"—with a Princess Smile!

"Well, um—Derek is sort of my mentor when it comes to the world of the highest-born nobles…"

Sil was the third son of a baron. He was not a highborn noble. He was a noble, but of the lowest rank. And if he was to shack up with a prince, his meager nobleman knowledge would leave him lacking at times. Now, there was also knowledge that highborn nobles lacked, but none of those things would cause them any trouble, power balance-wise.

Anyway, Derek was definitely the perfect teacher for Sil.

"And when Derek was telling me how highborn nobles personally brew tea for the guests they especially cherish, he proceeded to tell me a tale of his own folly."

Hmm. Interesting.

Yeah, the thing that muddied the whole Esfian tea ceremony was that it wasn't compulsory. This applied to royalty, too. They never taught you how to brew tea in school. It wasn't required knowledge, but it was useful. But this meant if you wanted to learn to brew tea, you'd need to either research it yourself or have somebody else teach you…

"When they were kids, Sirius asked Derek how to brew tea…and Derek gave in to temptation…" Sil continued, uncomfortably, "And when he lied,

Sirius believed him. The consequences were catastrophic…”

Derek! So it was you*!*

And you didn’t give in to temptation—you did it deliberately!

But considering this was the same kid-Derek who tormented me…it all checks out!

Even though they quarreled now and then, as a rule, Sirius never doubted anything Derek told him. So he taught Sirius how to make the most piss-putrid tea on the planet, which Sirius religiously adopted and inflicted upon me in an act of secondhand terrorism!

To make matters worse, Derek was one year Sirius’s senior. Even though Sirius outranked him, a year was a huge age gap for kids. And since Sirius was blinded by Derek’s seniority, I was subjected to that piss-putrid tea more times than I could count!

But then again, his evil plan had a high probability of backfiring on him, so I guess we’re even? You’re a crappy mastermind, kid-Derek!

“I blame Derek’s teaching style for that,” Sirius muttered sourly. “It looked awfully proper, considering it was bullshit.”

It sounded like an attempt to make excuses for his deception. I guess that part of his memory was consistent with Derek’s, at least…

“But why did I—?” Sirius cut himself off mid-question and shook his head.

“Sirius? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine—just a little tired,” Sirius insisted firmly. “So much has happened…and it’s still not over.”

Sil looked like he wanted to say something, but he shut his mouth.

“Isn’t that right, Octavia?”

“Yes, Brother.”

That was the signal—it was time to get to the matter at hand.

“Well, I need to go be tortured now,” Sil said, his tone filled with determination and spirit.

That signaled a sharp mood shift in the room.

Mostly between me and Sirius.

If I could put the mood into words… *What the frick, Sil?!*

Sil gulped down the rest of the tea Sirius had made for him and jumped to his feet. “Sirius, where am I going to be tortured? I assume I was exempt until now because I was asleep since that brief moment I was lucid back in the Sky Chamber…”

My goodness, man, why are you so hyped up for a torture session?!

“Sil?”

“Lord Sil?”

Sirius and I spoke in perfect harmony.

“Why would you be *tortured*?” I implored.

Sil was their target! He’s a victim!

Enhanced interrogation was a far cry from a polite Q&A session! Make it make sense!

“Well, because I…” Sil looked troubled.

Because you…what?

“I attacked you in the Sky Chamber, didn’t I?”

“Oh…you remember?”

Sil smiled bitterly and shook his head. “I don’t… What I saw—what I remember…it’s something I can’t quite understand…” He unconfidently strung the words together, then trailed off. “But I heard about what I did after I lost consciousness. I pointed a sword at you, Princess, and Sir Alderton stopped me.”

“You weren’t yourself then, Lord Sil. So it wasn’t your will, yes? Unless you’re suggesting you *wanted* to kill me?”

“I would never want that!” Sil shouted nervously.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” I said.

“But, Princess…the fact remains, I attacked royalty…”

“*Attempted* to attack. And I wasn’t wounded—”

“But you *were* wounded,” Sil snapped in a chillingly calm tone. His gaze was pointed at my left hand. “I can’t be the sole exception to the law. There is more than enough evidence…”

“But, Lord Sil…you wouldn’t be the sole exception.”

Sil gave me a questioning look.

“Before the junior ball, there was an incident at the training grounds where a sword was thrown and almost hit me. Klifford repelled the sword, so I was unwounded. And what do you think I did to that soldier, Lord Sil?”

I was referring, of course, to Rust’s little brother Heller.

“You punished him severely?”

“No. I determined it was an accident, and I let that soldier off in return for a small favor.”

While we’re on the subject of attempted crimes, there was also that time Rust attacked me with his mask. I didn’t punish him for that, either. Well, then again, I let him off on the condition that he take us to Sil.

Wait…come to think of it, I pardoned both crimes conditionally.

I had no desire whatsoever to have Sil tortured. However…

I couldn’t have asked for better timing—

“Brother.” I turned away from Sil and threw the ball into Sirius’s court. His aquamarine eyes stared warily back at me. “Let me first make you a promise. I will not have Lord Sil tortured over his attempted attack on me in the Sky Chamber. I won’t make a fuss over it. And since I’m the victim, my word is final—I shan’t let anyone else raise an objection. But in exchange—”

“You want me to implement your survey strategy?”

Give the man a prize!

“I’m not insisting that you set Klifford free. Comparatively, wouldn’t you say this little *request* of mine is rather agreeable?”

“Wait just a minute— Sirius, what is the meaning of this?!” Sil’s voice, shaking with doubt, echoed through the room.

With a sigh, Sirius reluctantly explained everything. It was a biased rendition, though. Sirius prefaced it all as my scheme to prove Klifford’s innocence.

And the result—

“If you need a decoy on the survey, let it be me.” That was Sil’s immediate response.

“I won’t allow that.”

“You mustn’t!”

Sirius and I looked at each other, surprised by our perfect harmony.

I’ve made a new discovery: When it comes to Sil, Sirius and I often have the same opinion.

57

Our eyes met only briefly. Sirius quickly turned back to Sil and shook his head. “They’re after royalty this time, Sil. You won’t work as a decoy.”

“But can you be entirely sure…that I’m *not* whom they’re after?” Sil retorted. His eyes were teeming with jealous suspicion for my brother—*teeming*! A sharpness crept into his hazel eyes, bringing a gallant manliness to his androgynous beauty.

Mmmm… Seeing this with my own eyes made me really appreciate how Sil’s readily changing emotions were what made him so approachable. If an emotionless face were his default, he’d be unapproachable. Way too beautiful.

But, Sirius—don’t ya think your Trust gauge is a bit too low with Sil? If this were a mobile game event, you’d totally get the bad ending! You know, in the kind of game where your Love and Trust levels were scored separately. I mean, of course both of their Love levels are plenty hi—

“Princess Octavia, is Sirius telling the truth?”

Whoa there, Sil. You’re asking me now? Could it be…his Trust level of me was higher than Sirius?

Wait, if I get dead serious and answer, “He’s lying,” *I feel like he’s gonna take that as gospel!*

Truth be told, I did think Sil was also being targeted. *That’s* why we needed him to be tucked away someplace safe this time. Trouble tends to follow the protagonist. So it was with heartbreaking reluctance that I needed to side with Sirius on this one!

“Brother is absolutely right. Only he and myself will make suitable bait for the traitors. In fact, if you came with us, that would only be more dignitaries who would need bodyguards.”

“Don’t come! Don’t you dare be bait!” That was the vibe I was going for.

“All right…”

It broke my heart to see Sil so sulky, but this situation called for tough love!

“So, Brother…does this mean you accept my proposal?”

“…I think I have to.”

“How very wise of you.” I smiled at him, feeling a bit wicked. I had no intention of hurting Sil *whatsoever*, but I needed to make Sirius *think* that if he defied me, Sil would be in trouble! This was key!

“But Klifford Alderton will accompany us, still in confinement and under my personal surveillance.”

“Klifford is known to be *my* bodyguard. How do *you* expect to bring him along?”

“We’ll tell everyone there’s been a restructuring of our guard system. I’ll make Alderton my bodyguard in name only.”

I had my reservations, but it was an apt compromise. If Klifford was to go with us and look natural, a changing of the guard was our best option. If he demoted Klifford to a common soldier, he’d stick out like a sore thumb. We couldn’t try to disguise Klifford, either. Sirius wanted to surveil him—if we disguised his distinguishing features and made him difficult to spot, that would defeat the purpose.

“All right—let me see Klifford now.”

“What…?”

“I need to give him orders. You saw what happened at the training grounds, no? Klifford will not follow any orders unless they come directly from me. Our plan to trap the traitors will stall otherwise.”

I wanted to touch base with Klifford before we went to battle, too, of course!

“I can’t let you see him alone. I’m coming with you.”

Then Sil suddenly broke his silence. “Sirius…you’re surveilling the wrong man.”

“I’ve got the wrong man? Then whom should I be surveilling?”

“Me.”

Sirius’s shocked eyes and Sil’s dead eyes stared into each other.

Sil continued, “The way I see it, neither Princess Octavia nor Sir Alderton pose even the slightest threat.”

“But Alderton is a suspect in the tampering of your car—”

“So are your bodyguards, Sirius.”

Silence.

“This is just my theory…but it seems a bit too contrived for Sir Alderton to have done it. No, what I’m trying to say is that when you’re confining anyone who is even slightly suspicious, I’m the most dangerous of them all if I’m roaming free.”

“How can you say—?”

Sil intercepted Sirius's protest. "You're taking this too lightly, Sirius. Now, technically, I was not in my right mind when I attacked Princess Octavia. But—so what? What if the same thing happens again? What if I indiscriminately attack someone again, drugged or not? What if I changed suddenly right now and attacked you?"

"That would never happen."

"I can't say the same." Sil shook his head again. Firmly. "Princess Octavia…I'm so sorry." Then he turned back to Sirius and declared, "Until the cause of what happened becomes clear, *I'm* the one who poses the biggest threat—*I* trust *myself* least of all. So even if Princess Octavia doesn't have me punished, I still think I deserve proper punishment for what I did."

I knew that monologue well. It's what Sil said when he snapped out of his trance from the sight of Sirius's blood.

"I'm scared of myself."

But in reality, Sil didn't say the word *scared*.

"Sirius. If you consider Sir Alderton a danger, then I want you to put me in solitary confinement under constant surveillance. I won't ask to be a decoy for your mission, and I promise I will behave."

"You're being stupid…"

"Am I? I thought you of all people would understand."

Silence.

Aaagh! God dammit!

I wanted to bang my head against a wall.

Sil! Why do you have to be like this? I, your victim, am trying to let you off the hook here! And Sirius looks like he's actually gonna do what you're asking!

But as a former reader, I gathered that Sil's trance state was induced by an external trigger. It wasn't something that just suddenly happened to him. So as a Sil stan, I vehemently opposed this plot development!

And why is that, you ask? Well, because I learned firsthand in the Sky Chamber just how to wake Sil from his trance state! And I don't care if you think I'm sus for that!

"Even if the cause of his trance state is unknown," I butted in to their argument, "if it were to happen again, if we know how to snap Lord Sil back to his senses, wouldn't it no longer be necessary to confine him? I

could do it. You could do the same, Brother. So could Father…so could Alec."

"You can't mean…!"

That's my brother; he reached the correct answer quickly. Well, he did already have the intel detailing how I returned Sil to normal.

"Royal…blood?"

I nodded with a flourish. "As long as he's with you, Brother, even if something should come over Lord Sil, nothing horrible will come of it." I was playing it cool, but I was dripping with sweat. "That is all I can tell you at the moment."

"*So dig no further!*" I warned him. If anything, it was a signal: I only knew how to snap Sil out of his trance—no further questions. I mean, if he started prodding, my answers would eventually have to fall into the "Time will tell" category.

I sipped my milk tea as if nothing had happened. Then I stole a glance at the boys. Sil was awkwardly confused. *Yeah, I know the feeling. It's like, how does this chick know how to snap me out of my trance when we don't even know why it happens in the first place? I totally agree!*

And as for Sirius… He met my gaze and sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. "Octavia…I have no idea what you're thinking."

That's the same thing my father said to me the other day.

"Are you sure you don't want to imprison Sil?"

I almost spat out my milk tea. Thank God I'd just swallowed it!

"And why would I imprison an innocent man?"

I mean, I just said I would pardon him, didn't I? I wouldn't go back on my word, okay? Did my evil plan to use Sil as a bargaining chip work *too* well? No matter how big a Sil stan I was on the inside, I guess Sirius was wary of me because our relationship had strayed so far from what it was in the books.

Sirius removed his hand from his forehead, looking tired. "Octavia's right. Sil, we have no reason to punish you."

Good, good. I nodded triumphantly in my mind.

"However."

Huh? However…what?

"In exchange, you will be under surveillance for a while." Then he turned to me. "And, Octavia, I will let you meet with Alderton. You're right, it's

best he hears everything from you. But I'm coming with you. I won't change my mind on that front."

"Understood…"

I technically accomplished what I set out to do in his room anyway. If I got too greedy, I'd just be asking for unwanted distrust.

"So—," a voice piped up.

"Sil!"

"Lord Sil!"

Once again, Sirius and I were in sync. We were probably thinking the same thing: *Sil, haven't you given up on the whole dungeon thing? Well, I object!*

"It's not what you think! Um, you're mistaken!" he said the first half to Sirius, the second to me. "Princess Octavia, I won't insist that you lock me in a cell. As long as you put me under surveillance…"

Sil also picked up on why Sirius and I had both called out his name. But then…why?

"Is there something else you want?" I asked.

Then Sil eagerly replied, "If you're seeing Sir Alderton, will you take me with you?"

There was a fight. A fight, ladies and gentlemen.

So this is what it feels like to be carpet bombed.

Sirius was like, *"Why do you have to see Alderton?!"*

And that lit the fuse on the Battle of Sirius and Sil. As for who won, well, Sil did. Only because at the very end, Sirius asked my opinion.

He asked me, *"Octavia. Wouldn't you mind if Sil comes along?"*

And I answered simply, *"I don't mind."*

Their reactions were polar opposites. Sirius got cold as permafrost, while Sil's smile blinded me like the sun. I could even see his puppy tail wagging with glee.

I mean, I had no reason to stop him from coming. If Sirius was tagging along anyway, it made no difference if another one or two people joined us. And I figured Sil wanted to see Klifford because of what had happened back at the Sky Chamber.

This is what he actually asked Sirius: *“I want to meet with Sir Alderton… so I can see if I can remember fighting him.”*

Klifford was an Adjutant—and there was a 90 percent chance Sil was, too…though it was unclear if he was aware of it or not.

But it wasn’t entirely implausible that Sirius’s mind was going the maybe-Sil-has-a-thing-for-Klifford route.

I was thinking it, too…and fangirling over the BL-ness of it all.

I secretly felt a little conflicted over it.

I looked to my left, where Sil was walking beside me; meanwhile, Sirius walked on my right. We were heading to where Klifford was being held: a dungeon beneath the training grounds. I complained to Sirius that I had been told it was house arrest. But he’d responded, *“The other suspects are receiving the same treatment. Many people said I was going too far, but I had to take a rigid stance. He’s in the nicest cell in the dungeon.”* So that was too much to process.

Our group was composed of me, Sirius, Sil, Hugh, and Nathan, who had been added at the last minute. Hugh took the lead, then Sirius, Sil, and I walked in a row behind him, then Nathan brought up the rear. I ran my eyes along the dark walls of the dungeon, faintly illuminated by tiny lanterns. I observed Hugh’s back as he led us. And if he was in love with Sil just like he was in the books…

I pressed a hand to my chest.

Mmm… That hits the spot…

Or conversely, if the impossible happened and Sil strayed and fell in love with Hugh…

Hmmm… I wouldn’t like Sil to stray, but if he really did fall in love with Hugh, I’d support that ship. That’s some sizzling hot BL there.

But…what if he fell in love with Klifford?

Nope—don’t like it.

I snapped Blackfeather open.

Sirius stole a glance at me, but I was too antsy to care.

Why don’t I like it?

Maybe it was because Klifford was three-dimensional—I just couldn’t get a BL buzz from him.

Did…did my fujoshi soul die?

No, no, no, that can’t be it…

I just didn’t like the idea of Klifford having a BL arc, that’s all… *Is* that all?

But that’s how this world works—

Is it because I don’t sense those vibes from Klifford at all?

Or maybe it was because becoming a Sovereign made one extra possessive of their Adjutant?

Whoa, Octavia, you’re spiraling. Pull yourself together.

“We’re almost there.”

Before we’d left Sirius’s room to go to the dungeon beneath the training grounds, Sirius had warned me, *“It’s a place unfit for a princess. Are you sure you want to go there?”*—and he was right. It was hard to believe this dungeon was *nice* as far as dungeons go. It was a far cry from the castle territory I was accustomed to living in. I heard the occasional *drip…drip… drip* of water from somewhere.

This dungeon was meant to be a temporary holding facility for those suspected of crimes. And the cells themselves were stratified, depending on the severity of the accusations against you. Klifford and the other suspects were to be held in the low-level cells where they wouldn’t be tortured. Hugh was the one who had explained it all to me, and I really wished he hadn’t rattled off the word *torture* so casually.

When I asked if the traitors captured at the junior ball were also being held here, they said no. That meant they were being held in the prison tower. Too bad—if the leader-Adjutant and the other Adjutant called Emilio were in the training ground dungeon, I might have been able to safely speak to them…

But instead—

As we passed by the cells containing Sirius’s bodyguards, I discreetly stole glances at them. If one of them had sabotaged Sil’s carriage, it would be feasible that one of them should react to the sight of Sil. But all the imprisoned bodyguards were uniformly polite. None of them reacted suspiciously. They even bowed to us.

If any of them reacted strangely…it was to me.

If I had to put it into words, I guess it would be like: “*Sirius and Sil I can understand, but what is Octavia doing here?*”

We walked past every cell containing one of Sirius’s bodyguards. Then we walked past a bunch of empty cells—until the end of the corridor.

Klifford was being held in the back. I tried to walk up to the bars, but Hugh's promptly raised arm stopped me. He was my roadblock.

"Hugh, lower your arm."

"But, Your Highness—"

I glared not at the hesitant Hugh but at my brother. He gave Hugh a helpless nod.

Roadblock cleared!

But the moment I tried to step forward, Sirius stopped me. "Octavia, hand it over to Hugh."

What is "it"? I followed Sirius's gaze… *Blackfeather?* I raised it questioningly, and he nodded.

So I was allowed to visit him, but only with the clothes on my back? Blackfeather was being treated like a possession, not a part of me. Were they thinking I'd, like, use Blackfeather to secretly hand something to Klifford? Yeah, I guess I could do that if I wanted to…but they were being way too untrusting!

"Understood." It was extra important to be obedient in times like this. I needed to show them I didn't have a splash of ulterior in my motives!

So I handed Blackfeather to Hugh as prompted. And even though my fan was considered cursed by many people, Hugh took it from me reverently, without a hint of discomfort.

When I finally approached the bars, I saw a silhouette stirring inside the cell. Then I could clearly see it was Klifford. With the bars between us, he walked right up to me and dropped to a knee.

"Rise, Klifford."

He looked up at me from his kneeling position. His gaze briefly fell onto the Lieche orchid Edgar had put in my hair. Then he got to his feet.

And now, as usual, I was the one looking up. I gave Klifford a quick look over. He had been wearing the bodyguard uniform back at the training grounds, but now he was dressed plainly in a black shirt and pants. This was the same outfit I had seen Sirius's imprisoned bodyguards wearing.

But maybe his clothes are a size too small… His top shirt button is undone. Oh, I can see the scar on his neck, too…

"Pardon my unsightly appearance," he mumbled, rebuttoning his shirt. He bowed softly, then raised his head again. That alone was enough to

dispel the savage beast aura he was giving off and bring him closer to Klifford the bodyguard.

That was a bit of a letdown… First off, his appearance wasn't unsightly. He didn't seem at all lazy or unkempt. It was a trick of face and physique, I suppose? I kind of wanted to see a little more of this authentic, non-bodyguard side of Klifford…

Authentic…

Klifford was a gold-star soldier, and I admired him for that, but at times, I realized that at his core, Klifford wasn't exactly built to serve others. In spite of this, oddly enough, he never seemed to be straining himself.

Well…when Hugh was imprisoned on false charges like this in the books, I do remember there was an illustration of him looking mentally worn down. I was worried about Klifford, but unless I'm mistaken, he doesn't look at all weary. He looks perfectly fine, even!

Actually, maybe it was because I thought Klifford could easily bust out of here if he felt like it… For that matter, was there even a person *capable* of causing physical harm to Klifford?

Regardless, it was still important to check him over.

"I trust you haven't undergone any mistreatment?"

Like torture…or torture.…or torture.

"No, Princess. No problems there." Klifford nodded coolly. He looked so calm that it actually gave me a pang of anxiety. Klifford wasn't the sort of guy who wouldn't even feel the effects of torture… He wasn't, right?

"He hasn't been harmed," Sirius said. I answered him with a glance at Nathan. Sirius picked up on that and added, "Nathan's little outburst was an exception… We reserve torture only for captives whose guilt has been proven."

"Understood. I'll take you on your word." Sirius fell silent. I turned my attention back to Klifford. "I came here today to discuss something very important with you."

I brought up the survey in two days' time. I told him that the anti-royalists had hatched a new plot and that Sirius and I would be the bait. I told him that he would come with us as Sirius's bodyguard and that this was to clear his name.

"What do you think?" I asked, but then I reconsidered the question. *Klifford has no right to say no this time… Okay, I'll rephrase that.* "I

suppose it’s odd to ask you what you think. This is a command.”

“If you command it of me, Your Highness—”

Klifford bowed…but my sharp ears caught it. He would obey because I commanded him, but he was reluctant to! I could hear it in his tone!

“Klifford. If there’s something you’d like to say, say it.”

His deep indigo eyes stared directly into mine. “I will obey your command, but I am your bodyguard, Your Highness. If any trouble should happen, I cannot put Prince Sirius first.”

Which means…?

“In other words, you can carry out your bodyguard duties, but you have no personal desire to protect me. If both Octavia and I are in danger, you’ll choose her over me.” Sirius didn’t look angry, but he spat the words at Klifford. “So be it. I don’t mind.” Then he turned to me. “Are we finished here?”

In a way, we were finished. I had delivered the mission to Klifford personally—

“We are *not* finished, Brother. Lord Sil also wanted to see Klifford.” He had come all this way, yet he was stuck in the corner the whole time, saying nothing. “Come forward, Lord Sil.”

Sirius had given his blessing, so he had no grounds to stop him. Sil slowly walked up to Klifford’s cell and stood before it.

How…does he feel? I wonder if he’s remembering what that trance was like—what it felt like when he and Klifford fought.

At the very least, Sil hadn’t reacted a bit when he saw the Lieche orchid in my hair this time. The only time Sil gave off Adjutant vibes was when he was Super Sil, in the trance.

When Klifford and Sil gazed at each other through the bars, Sirius’s face twisted slightly. He was trying his hardest to keep his emotions in check, and he was failing.

Meanwhile, Sil’s expression was stiff and vacant—the opposite of nervous. And Klifford, too, was emotionless…

Wait…a minute.

This pair…

The thought struck me.

They sort of seem…alike?

It was mostly Sil who made me think so. This was because Sil, whose face was usually rich with a variety of emotions, was showing nothing in his eyes. And it was because I could compare him to Klifford side by side; they were equally calm and cool.

It's not their looks, but…their auras?

Or maybe it's because they're both—Adjutants? Do they have a silent connection between them?

If somebody told me right now that they were brothers, I'd almost believe them…

"It's not working…" Sil's murmured words bounced off the dungeon walls. I noticed his eyelids droop as he shook his head in disappointment. Then he bowed to Klifford. "I was hoping that if I saw you in person, Sir Alderton, I might remember what happened…in the Sky Chamber, when I lost consciousness and fought you."

Now that Sil's expressive emotions had returned, I started to wonder if that fleeting notion they looked alike was a hallucination.

"Please forgive me…"

I don't think Sil could see it, since he was bowing again. And aside from myself, I don't think anybody else in the dungeon saw it, either. But Klifford's emotionless face changed for just an instant. He looked irate—incredibly so. I could see the discomfort burning in his deep indigo eyes.

"Klifford—" I called out to him without thinking.

Klifford glanced at me, then answered Sil. "You have no need to ask my forgiveness, Lord Burks."

"Oh, right. I'm sorr—er, never mind." Sil said nothing more and walked away from the cell.

"I think that's enough. Let's go." Sirius took Sil by the arm and began to walk.

But I didn't follow after them. "Brother, please. Give me a moment more."

Sirius turned around. Then with a sigh, he commanded, "Hugh. You stay behind."

Their footsteps echoed into the distance.

"I won't do anything suspicious, Hugh. So keep your distance."

Hugh silently complied and stepped back about the distance of another cell. Then I got as close to the bars as I possibly could.

“Klifford. Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Denied! But come on, Klifford, you were clearly upset when Sil apologized to you!

Sil’s behavior made perfect sense, psychologically. He had avoided tragedy only because Klifford was there. Even though royal blood was the key to wake him, the only reason I was alive and alert enough to take the action I did—was because Klifford’s sword stopped Sil and protected me.

Sil felt both grateful and guilty. And meanwhile, Klifford felt—disgust.

“But, Klifford, you…”

And it was more than disgust. It was…pain. Even though it lasted only an instant, I sensed great sorrow coming from him.

Actually…it was more like the pain you feel from an old wound being torn open again. The same pain I felt whenever those shitty, haunting memories of mine came back to me. Of course, I hoped it was all in my imagination. But it was times like this that my intuition was right, whether I wanted it to be or not…

After a while of staring into each other’s eyes, it was actually Klifford who looked away. “I’m sorry you had to see…such an unsightly side of me,” he muttered.

“It wasn’t at all unsightly. Klifford, I wish you would open yourself up more to me.”

I reached out between the bars, stood on tiptoe, and touched Klifford’s cheeks so he couldn’t look away.

“Tell me the truth. Are you okay?”

I wouldn’t ask him *what* was wrong, though just asking him that much might have been unwanted prying. But the comforting safeness Klifford gave me when he let me cry in his arms…I wanted to give the same to him.

Klifford looked back directly into my eyes and nodded. “Yes.”

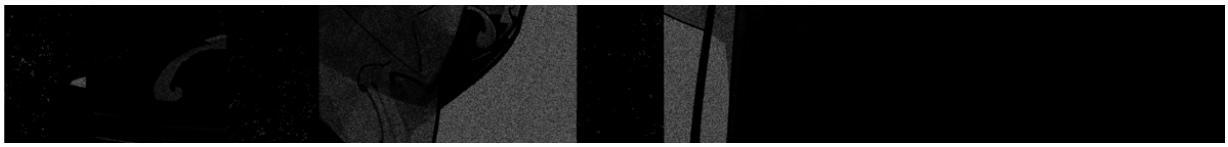
And his *yes* was genuine.

“Very well, then.” I smiled sweetly—then I froze up immediately after.

My hands…are cupping Klifford’s cheeks. Here I stand, Klifford’s face betwixt mine hands! Classic Octavia, you got impulsive and did something stupid!

As I stood there, Klifford looked down at my left hand and opened his mouth to speak. *Yup. Klifford’s operating at normal capacity!*

“Your wound… When will it heal?”
Urk. I can feel Klifford’s jaw moving with every word…!
“The doctor says with daily application of the salve, it should heal soon.”
“But how soon…? How many days specifically?”
“Even I don’t know that.”
“Oh.”
Is he upset? Maybe he wishes he could take away my pain. Ha-ha, funny.
I finally lowered my hands. *Phew.*
“Your Highness.”
“Yes?”
Did he also have something he wanted to say?
“Can you give me your right hand? For insurance…”



“What sort of insurance?”

“Since I cannot be by your side to protect you, I want to give you a replacement.”

Is this an Adjutant-Sovereign thingy?

I lowered my right hand between the bars. Klifford crouched down, turned to an angle Hugh couldn’t see, and kissed my hand. His Insignia glowed there briefly—then Klifford covered its light with his hand. And when his hand left mine, the Insignia was gone.

I guess this means Klifford can rush to my side if something happens during the survey. Mmm. Peak fantasy.

Wait a minute… Is it just me, or did the insignia get brighter…?

“Your Highness, are you done?” Hugh asked. “I think we may have stayed a bit too long.”

Translation: Wrap it up.

“The next time we meet will be the day of the survey. Is there anything you’d like to say before I go? Anything you want me to bring or check on for you?”

I want you to be in peak condition the day of the survey so you can prove your innocence! If there’s anything you want, fire away.

“All right, then…”

Ooh! Does Klifford have a request for me? I already imagined him saying no, so I’m kinda pleased.

“That flower… Who gave it to you?”

Does he mean the Lieche orchid Edgar put in my hair?

“It was a gift from Lord Edgar. He put this flower in my hair to bring me good…fortune—?”

Klifford’s arm shot through the bars. He snatched the flower from my hair, then stuck it back in.

Um…what?

“It was crooked.”

“Oh? Well, thank you.”

I guess Edgar didn’t put it in well enough. And wait a minute, this now means I’m getting my good fortune from Klifford instead of Edgar…doesn’t it?

“A lovely look.” A hint of a satisfied smile appeared on Klifford’s lips.

And I smiled, too…or I almost did, but I snapped out of it. *C'mon, Klifford! I gave you a generous offer; are you sure you wanted to waste your question on my hairstyle?*

I was about to interject this quip, when—

"Princess Octavia." Hugh called me.

I turned around to see him shaking his head. That probably meant my time was up.

Guess extending our visitation even further is gonna be tricky…

"I'm coming."

58

Aha. This is a dream—or so I thought.

Except something was off.

I thought this was a dream of my past life…but it's not.

I feel like I've become another person, seeing things through their eyes.

I'm…being punched?

I almost screamed, then my worldview suddenly shifted, from the inside to the outside.

There was a boy…not even ten years old. He looked a bit malnourished, though, so he might have been a little older.

He had black hair and indigo eyes… He looked kind, and he had a face on par with Alec's. The first person who came to mind was Sil as a young boy. *Oh, except, going off his hair and eye color, he looks a bit more like…*

Even though he was being punched, the boy did not show the slightest resistance.

"Take a sword! Fight!"

"It's hopeless… Enough. I can't waste any more time on a dud like him."

"But—"

"He's a bad influence on Nathaniel. Just do it quick."

One of the men who was beating the boy grabbed him by the scruff and spat, "Is it 'cause your wounds will heal anyway? Punch and kick all we want, and your wounds heal in days without a scar. That'd make anybody

jealous. But you've got more than that body—you've got talent. I know you do. This is your final warning. Fight."

"No," the boy snapped back.

The man shoved the boy to the ground. Unable to stand it anymore, I ran over to the man and hit him, but my hands slipped right through. *Wait a minute, I* am *dreaming, aren't I? And it's not like it's a dream about that mysterious young man, either— Shouldn't I be the most powerful person here?*

For something that was supposed to be *my* dream, this was some really sick joke…

The boy coughed and rose to his feet. His eyes looked right past me. He couldn't see me. But I could tell what he was thinking.

He didn't have a name. But the one thing he knew clearly was that he was a disappointment. Because his birth had caused such high expectations.

His people had hoped that he would exhibit a rare gift for battle. But the boy who was born to them—this boy—even when he grew old enough to grip a sword, he feared swinging it.

That was why he wouldn't fight.

"Then you'll have to be punished." The man punched the boy unconscious and tied him up.

Wait…you're kidding, right? I opened and closed my mouth, but no words come out. *All I can do is watch…*

The boy was tossed into a large lake—and he sank into it. I ran to the lake's edge, but my hands slipped right through him. Water filled the boy's open mouth. He struggled in pain…until he suddenly became calm. *That's it. You've got this!*

He held his breath and reached into his shoe for his concealed dagger. But he lost his grip, and the blade sank into the depths below.

I quickly reacted and caught—sight of the blade slipping through my hand! *I'm so useless!*

But the boy's left hand finally managed to grab the dagger. Then he cut the weighted net around his feet. The weight sank with the net to the bottom of the lake. His body now light, the boy swam, straining to get to the surface. Everything above him was water. Dark water. He could see nothing. His only choice was to keep paddling and trust that he would

eventually reach the surface. Holding his breath was starting to hurt. Water filled his open mouth.

And I could feel exactly what the boy was feeling. Was I one with him?

With a hoarse gasp and a coughing fit, the boy's face popped above the water's surface. His mouth opened wide, thirsty for air.

When the boy reached the shore, he noticed a presence beside him.

"Oh. You survived that?" The man stepped on the boy's right hand with all his might. "Just die already."

Stop it, stop it, stop it! I can feel it.

I can feel this boy's heart…changing…

"What…?" the boy murmured.

As I felt the man's foot on my hand, at last, I understood.

I understood just how simple it was.

"Nobody…"

"What's that? Ya don't wanna die? Well, too ba—"

Without hesitating, the boy swung his left hand from the water and stabbed the man's foot with his dagger. The man screamed.

His dagger wasn't for hurting anyone. That wasn't why he carried it.

I didn't want to understand his thoughts…but I did. The boy's mind was freakishly calm.

Just as those around him had hopes in his gifts…this boy had hopes, too.

Hopes that somebody would come for him. Rescue him. Reach out to him.

But—

"At last…I understand."

At last—

At last…the boy conceded to reality.

Nobody will come rescue me—

If he wanted to live, he had to take care of himself. He had to carve out his own path.

By any means necessary.

The only one he could rely on was himself.

The moment he realized this, the weapon melted comfortably into his hand. Its cold steel would never betray him. He could manipulate it at will.

The fear of gripping a sword—the fear of fighting another person—how foolish he had been.

“Do you have any idea what trouble you’re in…?!”

“Fight. You wanted me to show you my gifts, right?” the boy spat out.

Oh, I’ll show you—

Nobody is going to come rescue me—

I could feel his emotions in my heart. Resignation…and determination.

And even though this was a dream…I recognized his fighting style.

He was so overpowering that it’s hard to believe he was the little boy who had just lain there, getting a thrashing. The gap was mind-boggling.

That’s right… This boy…his black hair…his indigo eyes…his dagger—

“Klifford…?”

My voice… I can speak now.

The dagger—it was exactly like the one I’d borrowed at the Sky Chamber—the boy held it up, dripping in the man’s blood. He spun around to face me.

Can he hear me?

“Who’s there?” His cold, menacing voice cut through the air.

The boy saw me. His eyes, as deep blue as Klifford’s, opened wide with vulnerability.

His mouth opened—

Then I woke from the dream.

I remembered nothing more.

“You’ve received a security briefing for tomorrow’s survey from Prince Sirius.” Hugh grabbed the stack of papers from the reception desk.

Tomorrow was survey D-day. Sirius and I would act as bait to trap the anti-royalist traitors in their own attack.

I was able to tell Klifford the plan in his cell. The other suspects in the dungeon…Sirius’s bodyguards…they surely heard it, too. But there was no telling what would come of it.

But there was something even bigger pressing on the back of my mind—last night’s dream.

The first Lieche orchid Klifford had put in my hair was still there, and before I went to bed, I moved the flowers Edgar had given me that day so

that I could be surrounded by their sweet fragrance and sleep deeply—and yet.

I was infected by a completely different source than my shitty haunting memories and had a nightmare…

And there was more to it…I was sure of it…

When I woke, I was sobbing. I always tried to wake myself before Sasha arrived so I could make myself presentable to a certain extent…but I couldn't do that this morning. I mean, whenever I had flashbacks of that haunting memory or when I dreamed about my past life, sometimes—*sometimes*, okay, like I could count it on one hand—sometimes I'd wake up crying. And I'd done such a good job of making sure nobody noticed. Yet…!

This morning, I epically failed… I had no choice but to be honest and tell my handmaids I'd had a bad dream.

My handmaids' mastery of the cosmetic arts was unparalleled. And now that I'd eaten lunch and it was afternoon, nobody could notice my swollen eyes. Well, then again, the only people I saw that day were Sasha, Matilda, and Hugh anyway…

Since tomorrow's itinerary was already set in stone, there was no use in poking my brother, so I stayed out of the garden and shut myself up in my room instead.

All I did that day was plan my dress and accessories for the next day. Since I was going on official business, I needed something brighter than the latest style…so I chose a cream-colored dress with a full skirt.

Most of my dresses were chosen a month in advance, and I would make my final decisions again later. After consulting with Matilda, Sasha, and the other handmaids, I chose shoes in a similar color. I think they were quite Octavia-esque in silhouette and style. I was a little worried that Blackfeather would clash with the ensemble, but when I gave myself a looking over, it was all good!

As for my accessories, that was already chosen for me: my princess tiara. But I decided to put real flowers into it the day of. And when I told Sasha and the other handmaids about my recent flower craze, they were super on board with it.

Then, due to fears of my bandaged hand drawing attention, we quickly got a lacey glove for it.

All that remained was to wait for the next day!

I should have been focused on the survey—but I couldn't help but dwell on that dream.

Dreams were just dreams. They were based on your thoughts and memories. So that dream about the boy was a creation of my imagination. It was a dream my brain made up! …How terrifying.

No matter how many times I look back on it, everything is still vivid. And that boy…at first, I envisioned him as a young Sil, but that was Klifford… right?

Wow, way to create a dream about Klifford getting tortured, you piece of shit brain! He was a frickin' kid, too!

With a sigh, I held the stack of papers in one hand while I cradled my head in my other.

That was a dream…right?

I hoped it was a dream. I hoped my brain was just really sick and twisted.

That nightmare… I don't want it to be true.

"Are you tired, Your Highness? You should rest…" Sasha looked at me with worry.

"Oh, no…I'm fine."

Since I'd woken up crying, Sasha, who was already an excellent maid, had become three times as capable.

"I'd love a cup of your special tea, Sasha. Might I trouble you?" I was referencing a milk tea with extra milk.

"Coming right up, my lady!" Sasha hopped to work making the tea.

I have to pull myself together…

With a determined grunt, I faced the stack of papers again. They were about tomorrow's survey…I think.

Hmm, yes, yes, indeed. Hmmm…?

"Hugh?"

"Yes?" Hugh answered promptly from his post.

"The soldiers and knights in this plan…they're all under my brother's jurisdiction, aren't they?"

I had only one bodyguard—Klifford—but aside from him, I had a predetermined pool of soldiers who accompanied me on outings and on carriage rides. Even though they weren't my personal platoon, I guess you

could say they were the princess's reserve? It was the same when I went to the junior ball.

"I'd like for at least some of our men to be those with experience guarding me."

I went out of my way to ask Sasha for my junior ball driver's name so I could snag him. And the driver with the cozy carriage was named Karl! I had my heart set on him being my driver for my next outing, too!

But Karl's name was not on the list. The driver for tomorrow's activities was some other person.

"Everyone who was your guard for the junior ball has been ruled out, Highness."

"Why?"

"As they failed to carry out their sworn duty to protect you, their ability to participate in this survey is questionable. Moreover, we have not yet concluded our investigation of them."

"But how do you justify including only the men handpicked by my brother?"

Skill-wise, all of them were fine. But, to the point, most of them were Sirius x Sil shippers. And most of the guys on Team Sirius hated me… And I wouldn't have Klifford by my side to protect me the day of… An ally. I needed an ally on my side!

My brain raced to think of one. *In times like this, I lean on…Alec! Even though he's gone right now, if I could have one of his soldiers join me… Aha! I know just the guy!*

"I feel anxious being accompanied by men I do not know. Might I suggest one of Alec's soldiers join us?"

"Prince Alexis…you say?"

"Yes. The soldier's name is Guy Peutz. He's one of Alec's rising stars."

"Request acknowledged—I will relay your message to Prince Sirius."

He was the man Alec sent to me as a messenger. I know I can trust Guy! I trust Alec, ergo, I trust Guy!

"Please wait just a moment."

Sirius had beefed up my normal security detail and had two of Hugh's helpers out in the hallway on standby. While Hugh ran my request by them, I scanned the security briefing once more.

As luck (perhaps) would have it, the only person on the list who appeared in the source material was Hugh. I guess Nathan was benched for this mission.

Hugh returned. “Sorry for the wait, Your Highness. You shall receive Prince Sirius’s answer in due time.”

“Ah, wait a minute, there’s another soldier I’d like to add.”

“And who might that be?”

“Heller Byrne.”

The moment I said the soldier’s name, Hugh’s face clouded over. “Heller…Byrne, Your Highness?”

“Yes. He also serves Alec.”

“But wasn’t he the soldier who threw a sword at you?”

“Ah…you are well-informed.”

I’m kinda shocked. I thought we settled that matter internally.

“Does everyone in the castle know?”

Hugh shook his head. “No. In part because Prince Alexis did not cause a fuss over it. A small circle of us know—nothing more. Prince Sirius is also in the know.”

“Nevertheless, I want him to join us.”

I wanted Guy there for emotional support. But since Heller was Rust’s little brother, I wanted to add him, too. What a perfect opportunity to ask him all sorts of juicy questions!

The sweet perfume of the milk tea wafted through the air.

“It’s ready, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.”

I took a sip from the teacup Sasha set down in front of me. *Mm. This is exactly the comfort I needed. What a pleasant flavor.*

At the start, Matilda always made my tea. All my new handmaids were trained by her. I asked them all what the secret to good tea was, but nobody would tell me. They were always like, *“If we told you how, wouldn’t you just make your own tea?”* Incomprehensible. It would make everyone’s lives easier!

And Matilda would be like, *“You mustn’t do the job of a handmaid, my lady. Whenever you want tea, all you need to do is summon one of us”*—oh, how many battles I’d lost!

Truly, Sasha’s milk tea was tasty. Though it was a different flavor from my brother’s leveled-up tea game. It was a calming flavor…

“Princess Octavia—”

Just when I thought Hugh was going to finish with “*I am opposed to adding Heller to the entourage!*” he said:

“Do you think Prince Sirius has changed?”

What? Where’d that question come from?

“In what way…pray tell?”

“When I observed his recent behavior…I was reminded of how he practiced hard in the past to make you tea, Your Highness.”

Though he was a lowborn nobleman, Hugh had spent a lot of time with Sirius in childhood. Almost as much as Derek. They weren’t exactly friends like Sirius and Derek, though, due to Hugh’s lower status. If Sirius and Derek were friends first, lord and vassal second, then Sirius and Hugh were more lord and vassal.

But does this mean Hugh senses something’s amiss about Sirius…just like Derek? Sirius did have some abnormalities in his memory. I caught glimpses of that, too. But—

“He is still the same man. His nature hasn’t changed. Do you disagree, Hugh?” *He’s not saying anything… What does that mean?* The golden tassel on the hilt of Hugh’s dangling sword caught my eye. “You needn’t agree with me as a necessity. I invite you to be frank with me. Unless there’s some personal reason preventing you from speaking your mind?”

“Both in the past and present…I’ve had the sense that there are two Siriuses.”

“But I presume you’ve sworn loyalty to both, yes?”

“Yes, of course.” Hugh’s black eyes were sure and true. His strong will was crystal clear. It was a relief to see.

Dang, for a second there, I was worried the trust and loyalty between Hugh and Sirius had a crack in it just like it did in the source material.

But Hugh wasn’t finished talking.

“But that’s why I believe that if the Sirius from the past were to see Sirius now, he would be terribly angry with him.”

His tone was just as firm, the loyalty in his eyes unwavering. The way he looked didn’t entirely match the words he was saying.

“Hugh…?”

Hugh lowered his gaze. “Your request to add Heller Byrne to the guard is confirmed.”

I received an answer from Sirius within the day.

As I requested, Guy and Heller would join our survey as bodyguards.

A Commoner Soldier Overanalyzes Everything—Here's His Probably Peaceful Day Off

"So that's the story. Guy. Are you listening?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm listening," I replied absentmindedly, taking a bite of my fish skewer in the crowded restaurant. It was deep-fried, piping hot, and quite fragrant. It was sublime. The pride of cheap, tasty eateries everywhere.

When you included food stalls, the number of eating establishments in the royal capital was on a whole other level than my hometown. They were highly competitive, and their prices and flavors ranged from one extreme to the other, but this restaurant was definitely a hidden gem.

"Listen, Guy, I may be nice, but I get mad when I'm crossed." My lanky redheaded companion grumbled into his skewer of meat and vegetables. It was slathered in a salty-sweet sauce. *Ooh, that one's really yummy, too. Maybe I should order one next.*

"Hey, I heard you. You were talking about the junior ball, right?"

No matter how hungry I was or how good those skewers were, there was no way I could have let that conversation topic go in one ear and out the other.

It was about *that thing* that had happened about three days ago.

Princess Octavia graced the junior ball with her presence, something she had not done in a very long time. The castle was in such a tizzy over it that even a lowly rookie soldier like me heard about it.

“That’s right! With all those beauties, it was a feast for the eyes.”

Aha. I see.

“I’m happy for you…,” I said flatly.

“But there was no fated encounter for me, you see, which’s why I’m hanging out with you on my day off, my Guy.”

“Maybe your standards are just too high.”

He swung both ways, but he was a stickler for *beauty*. Regardless of age. He gave off the vibe of a man who might even romance a young girl, as long as she was beautiful—which scared the shit out of me! He seemed to have a basic level of common sense, so I think he was safe… I *hope* he was safe.

And since, naturally, he was only attracted to beautiful men…I was ineligible. Thank the gods I was born to average parents in a normal village.

Then again, this guy wasn’t exactly beautiful himself. How should I put it… His aura? His aura *sometimes* made him appear beautiful. I sat and stared at him—at Steyn.

I thought back to how Steyn and I met.

I’d settled in with my castle duties, and Prince Alexis had chosen me as his sparring partner. Then one day, I had a day off apart from my small circle of soldier friends. Unable to stand the barracks, which bloomed with man-on-man romance, I headed out into the castle town, short on cash. Since my freshly laundered civvies were drying, I had to wear my soldier’s uniform.

And as I wandered aimlessly around the capital, I heard a man yell, “You there, soldier! Just the man I need.” He wanted me to help a girl who was being harassed by a hoodlum.

A glance revealed a scene exactly like he had described. And keeping the peace was a soldier’s duty.

“I’m just *so-o-o* weak! Help a guy out, will ya, soldier-boy?” the redhead asked cheerfully, giving me a thumbs-up.

That was Steyn.

I managed to rescue the girl—who was really pretty, by the way—but our love story was not to be. She already had a boyfriend!

Incidentally, the hoodlum ran away as soon as I stepped between him and the girl. A soldier had the crown's authority behind him. Not even a hoodlum was dumb enough to pick a fight with one. Those bastards chose their battles wisely.

"Guy…um, I'm sorry, but those bedroom eyes won't work on me. You aren't exactly my type, sooo—"

"It's not what you think."

"If your face were a little prettier, then you'd whet my appetite—"

"For the love of God, please keep your appetite dry forever," I snapped back.

"Oh *my*! So polite, yet so rude! You would fit in well with the aristocracy, my Guy!"

The cackling redhead Steyn was Duke Nightfellow's servant—if you could believe it. When I was hit with the shocking truth, to be honest, I wondered if Duke Nightfellow was desperately understaffed.

Anyway, since he worked for a high-ranking nobleman, he was well versed in noble affairs. And since he himself was a commoner, he was well adapted to both the ways of the nobility and the peasantry.

He was easy enough to go out to lunch with now and then, like I was on this very day. Steyn said he was waiting to meet with someone from work when I bumped into him, so I was keeping him company until they arrived. I could just leave once they showed.

"So by the way, Prince Alexis didn't go to the junior ball, huh?" Steyn abruptly changed the subject.

"And?"

"Well, I'd just assumed he would be Octavia's escort to the junior ball. He usually is."

Well, it's classified intel, but Prince Alexis is away from the royal capital at the moment. Wait a minute, why is Steyn focused on that? He can't be…

"Steyn…don't tell me you have a thing for Prince Alexis?"

"Ahh, nope, nope." He shut me down with a wave of his hand. "He's okay, like, if I caught a glimpse of him from a distance. But y'know, for such a pretty boy, Alexis is crazy mean! He's really picky, too. He doesn't give anyone with ulterior motives a second glance. And watching him, you

can tell he just really hates people. And y'know, I want a romance where I actually have a chance—whenever beauty rejects me, I just die! My *heart* dies!"

"Yeah, well…it kind of makes sense when you consider his environment."

Imagine having guys shove their affections on you when you're not even slightly interested… I know girls hate it when men they don't care about come on to them; it had to be similar to that.

Prince Alexis would've had an easier life if he'd been born a commoner. No, wait, he'd probably just be constantly chased by girls instead, wouldn't he? Guess either way, it's tough being pretty…

"My work for His Excellency often sends me to the royal capital, you see. I never miss an opportunity for boy-watching. I was on full alert at the junior ball, too!"

And his prime target, Prince Alexis, was not at the junior ball.

"Prince Alexis has fallen ill," I informed him. That was technically not privileged information. This morning, a section of the soldiers was lamenting, "Ohhh, Prince Alexis has been gone for four days…four whole days!" And these were guys who didn't ordinarily carry on like that, so it really made me shudder. It was one of many incidents that made me realize I actually preferred guys who didn't hide their creepy natures.

"Ummm, I dunno, he looked perfectly fine when I saw him a few days before the junior ball."

"A man's health can change drastically in a few days."

"*Can* it, though?"

"Yes, it can."

Y'know, Steyn, I'm pretty sure you were at the junior ball to do other things besides basking in beauties.

"So at the junior ball…in the Sky Chamber, was it? What exactly happened with that raid? Like…was anybody hurt?" I asked it as casually as possible.

"Huh? Don't ya know, my Guy? There was a raid, yes, but the junior ball sailed on smoothly—nobody died."

"Well…I was just making sure."

Three days ago, a group of armed traitors raided Countess Rosa Reddington's junior ball. Their plot was foiled before they could carry it

out, and there were no deaths—but the one they were targeting was *Princess Octavia*.

And I knew something. I knew her bodyguard was the Emissary of Ongarne.

Would he have extended any mercy to those traitors? Even I was only saved by a hair. If those traitors showed obvious hostility…there would be a mountain of corpses. A complete slaughter of the enemy! I would not be at all surprised if a tragic bloodbath drawn by his hand alone had secretly occurred at the junior ball.

"Just making sure, huh…? Well, now I've got a question for *you*, my Guy! Did you by any chance receive some classified intel from the castle that might cast doubt on the casualty report?"

Crap. I sparked Steyn's curiosity in a weird way. Steyn was pretty pesky when he got like that. I panicked for a moment, but I quickly calmed myself. *Compared to the time I was in the presence of Princess Octavia and the Emissary of Ongarne and nearly lowered my life expectancy, Steyn's pushiness is nothing more than a minor pain in the ass.*

My life wasn't even in danger. Just like the Sky God, my heart was calm and sunny.

"Look, Steyn…who the hell do you think I am?"

"You're my guy, Guy."

"I'm a rookie soldier—I haven't even received my designation. What makes you think I'd have any secret intel?" (I totally did, though.) "You know, it's just, you were at the scene of the raid. That's why my question came out the way it did."

"Yeah, I was *technically* there…but I didn't *see* any of the intruders; it was all over before I realized it had started. I mean, if I find myself in a sketchy situation, I get my ass out of there pronto. I don't wanna get caught in the action by accident, y'know!"

"You'd probably be the last man standing in a war…"

"See? You get me. Besides, I wouldn't go to war in the first place!"

"I dunno—you strike me as a guy who isn't scared of anything."

Not even the Emissary of Ongarne. I could kind of see him holding his own in a fight.

"Huh? Oh, but I am. I'm scared of people who don't make light of wimps like me." Steyn's eyes were dead serious as he chomped into his second

skewer.

"Um, *what*?"

"Physically, mentally—doesn't matter which—most strong guys are subconsciously quite arrogant. So an obviously wimpy guy like me isn't at all a threat to them. Even if I do a bunch of stupid things, they never suspect me. They just accept my failures as the product of my inability. And why? Because I'm a wimp, you see!"

"A wimp…"

Why's this guy so proud and loud about being a wimp?

"My wimpiness is my virtue, my Guy. I'm proud of it, really." Steyn boldly pounded his chest with his fist.

"You're…proud? Really…?"

"Yup! Wimps get overlooked. My true nemeses are strongmen who won't be fooled! They're just as hard on wimps! It's so hard for me!"

"How are they hard on you?"

"Well, take your basic brawl: Even a wimp can pick off guys one at a time. He can play dead and stab 'em right in the heart. Strong or weak, wimpy or not, age, gender, none of it matters. It's an amazing equalizer!"

"It's a pesky equalizer…"

I guess equality was in the eye of the beholder.

"Yup, exactly. That's why it makes my job difficult, and I don't like it. Beauty's my only exception."

"*That's* your conclusion…"

Now I'm sorry I asked.

"Speaking of beauty, I got to meet Burksie at the junior ball…"

I had finished my skewer and had just taken a bite of a braised rice dish from the neighboring kingdom of Khangena. I barely avoided coughing it up as I forced it down my throat.

Burksie… I had no comeback for the offensive nickname. That's just the kind of person Steyn was. Even I had received the pet name *my Guy* without asking for it.

But Burks…he means Sil Burks, doesn't he?

He was Sirius's lover. Soon-to-be fiancé, future husband-to-be. In accounts of the junior ball brawl, the name Sil Burks came up frequently.

"Are you sure it's all right to be telling this to an outsider?"

"Oh, I keep anything I'm not supposed to say in the vault!"

“Okay, then…”

“My Guy, you’re not beautiful, but you’re a good egg… If you’re ever in trouble, call my name and I’ll come rescue you.”

I appreciated the sentiment. I was sure Steyn meant it in earnest. But there was a big caveat. This was *Steyn* we were dealing with.

“But…if the enemy is beautiful, you can abandon that shallow part of yourself, I hope?”

“Maybe I’d become *your* enemy, my Guy!” Steyn declared cheerfully, without hesitation.

Even if they lock me away, I can never trust this guy to rescue me! Shit, all I’ve done is gain one more enemy! To make matters worse, I know I could beat this guy in close combat…but I get the sense he’s pesky to have as your enemy…

I’m exhausted.

I heaved a sigh. “Well—even though it was for work, I’m happy you got to meet Lord Burks.”

His silhouette held its own, even beside Prince Sirius’s overwhelming beauty. To a beauty appreciator like Steyn, it must have been a feast for the eyes. Then again, Esfia was the only place people could have such a casual conversation about the prince’s gay relationship.

“Oh, beauty-wise, I was deeply satisfied. But…something unexpected happened, too.”

“What happened?”

“Princess Octavia. He seemed genuinely concerned about her. And from the look of things, she didn’t exactly dislike him, either.”

“Huh…”

I swallowed a spoonful of the rice dish. It was delicious. Rice sure was good. The fish and meat were also both nicely seasoned.

“Uh, my Guy, can’t I get a bigger reaction than that?”

“We’re talking about Princess Octavia and Lord Burks. The princess and the prince’s lover. Both are worlds apart from me. I’ve never even spoken __”

I cut off there. I *did* speak with Princess Octavia when Prince Alexis gave me a message to give her…

While I was at it, I spoke with Her Highness’s servant, the Emissary of Ongarne.

I shuddered. *Terrifying.*

“Never even spoken…?”

“I’ve never even spoken with them, so you shouldn’t expect a big reaction from me.”

In actual fact, I got the sense that I *would* get a second chance to speak with Princess Octavia. That was why I needed to work extra hard to make sure I was worthy of a tassel on my sword hilt.

“Isn’t it a good thing that he and she should be friends?”

But this was Princess Octavia we’re talking about. There had to be more to their friendship than that. Word had it that Lord Burks attended the same junior ball three days ago—and he had arrived with Princess Octavia. Additionally, Her Highness performed the opening dance with Derek, son of Duke Nightfellow…

“Say, Steyn? Your master… Is he doing all right?”

“His Excellency?”

“No, I mean Lord Derek.”

“Lord Derek?”

“Well, he danced with Princess Octavia, didn’t he?”

It was just a dance. Merely a dance.

But no. A dance with Princess Octavia carried a deeper meaning!

Legend had it that a dance with Her Highness resulted in either glory or destruction.

This was common knowledge among the nobility. The only reason a humble soldier like myself knew about the superstition was because of all the junior ball–related gossip that had been circulating throughout the castle.

A memory flashed across my mind. It was from four days ago, the day before the junior ball, when I went to the practice room to deliver a message to Princess Octavia from Prince Alexis.

Princess Octavia and the Emissary of Ongarne were performing a dance —the Dance of Death.

I suppose the Emissary of Ongarne was awarded…glory? Though his existence itself seemed to have a higher affinity to destruction…

And there was *one more thing*.

I didn’t dance with the princess…but I stood in a practice room with dance music playing while the princess whispered in my ear. It’s not like we

danced or anything! But by touching my ear…had she led me out to treacherous waters?

Could it be…that I'm going to fall to my destruction? Or will I attain glory?

It was that phenomenon: being shocked way after the fact.

I had no recourse but to laugh. And one of my fellow soldiers had asked me, *"Hey, you okay, Guy? You have those dead fish eyes I see on handmaids sometimes."*

Even I, who didn't dance with her, wound up like that. So it was inevitable that I would worry about the guy who actually danced with her at the junior ball! I worried for him like I'd worry for me.

"Uh, sixty…forty?" Steyn finally spoke after a few seconds' thought.

"Sixty…forty?" Was that code?

"The odds of Lord Derek falling to destruction are sixty percent. Odds of attaining glory are forty percent. This's all predicted by my research. I have the feeling it'll be fifty-fifty soon."

My jaw stayed dropped. "Um, listen…"

"If Lord Derek is doing well, I think we'll find out very soon."

"Very…soon?"

"Incredibly soon."

I don't get it. Does he mean I'll catch a glimpse of him at the castle? Junior ball aside…I'm not really sure about that.

That's because there were whispers among my Prince Sirius-supporting seniors that perhaps Derek had betrayed the prince. Also, that Princess Octavia was trying to usurp Sirius's power. That speech His Majesty gave the day before had sparked those rumors.

But as far as I could tell from the distant glimpses I'd caught of Prince Sirius, he looked perfectly normal to me. Princess Octavia had taken the last three days off at the order of His Majesty. What with the raid, a lot of us were expecting her to spend the next week confined to her bedchamber.

And Prince Alexis's illness was in name only. In truth, he was away from the castle—

"Huh? That princess? Nah, it can't be her."

"But Princess Octavia were the one what found the crown. She 'ad to feel *something*."

"I mean, Prince Sirius ain't the *crown* prince."

“Ya stupid bastard! He’s as good as the crown prince—he’s first in line! He’s the *oldest* prince!”

Another patron—a red-faced old guy who was day-drinking—was bickering with his friends in the seats around him.

“Ah, they’re probably discussing His Majesty’s announcement,” Steyn mumbled expertly while twirling the skewer in his mouth. He looked like he was joking, but I agreed with him.

“Could be…”

The drunk old men were right. Even though Sirius was next in line to the throne, he wasn’t officially the crown prince. That spot was still vacant. I had always assumed that since he was the eldest prince, he basically was the crown prince, but nothing was set in stone.

Until His Majesty made an official proclamation, someone besides Prince Sirius could be named crown prince. Even the hierarchy of his heirs could change.

That had all only just come to light recently—when Princess Octavia found the lost true crown.

Yesterday, the king had personally delivered an address to his subjects. The royal crown passed down through the generations was a fake…rather, it was a replica made when King Eus lost the original. But the true crown was found. And purely by luck…

It was found at Paradise in the Sky, a venue for junior balls. The true crown was tucked away there, back when it used to belong to the royal family as their second castle.

And Princess Octavia was the one who had found it.

King Enoch’s announcement sent waves through many social circles. It was the *real crown*…and *Princess Octavia* had found it. It seemed contrived. A fine kettle of fish. People couldn’t help but see it that way.

Then there was the attack at the junior ball. Princess Octavia was their target—but she was more than that. She was bait in a plot Duke Nightfellow and Countess Reddington had orchestrated and carried out to catch the traitors.

And Princess Octavia just coincidentally took action on her own—that’s how it was interpreted. But it was hard to believe the princess wasn’t cognizant of the plan…because she took such assertive actions. Such

ridiculously bold actions. Actions which resulted in the long-lost crown as a party gift.

On top of all that, she delivered the crown to His Majesty through Duke Nightfellow. They were friendly in private, but in public, Duke Nightfellow distanced himself from the princess. Yet he was the one who delivered the crown to King Enoch on her behalf.

This could only mean one thing: Duke Nightfellow had publicly taken Princess Octavia's side.

Little by little, the princess was establishing her foothold. Over the past three days, even I, a peasant, had learned a lot about the power struggles of the nobility. I didn't mind, since it would come in handy for my own future success.

But still…

If the true crown had returned, wouldn't it have been better to swap the crowns in secret? Call it peasant's intuition. We peasants assumed the crown on His Majesty's head was genuine all this time. So why would they make a show of announcing it wasn't?

Then there was the matter of King Enoch's successor—and I can't even pretend to know what he was thinking.

I chewed my meal in silence, down to the last grain of rice. Then I set down my spoon and sighed. *What a great meal.* I picked up my glass of sparkling water.

"Aha, there he is. Hi! Over here!"

Steyn looked up from his meat-filled bread roll and waved at the restaurant entrance where somebody had just appeared. I sipped my sparkling water, assuming the person Steyn was waiting for had arrived. Then I shot a casual glance at his visitor—and spat out my drink.

"Bfft! Ack!" The carbonation assaulted my throat. "Steyn! You—"

You should've told me who was coming, jackass!

He's not your "work colleague," he's the son of the duke you serve! Derek Nightfellow? In a peasant eatery like this?! Thanks for the warning!

When Lord Derek approached our seats to find Steyn cackling and myself choking on sparkling water, he seemed to pick up on something. With a

deep sigh, he growled, "*Steyn…*"

"Hey, I'm innocent. My Guy just overreacted because I *kinda* didn't tell him who was coming! I didn't hurt him, I swear! We're friends! Right, my Guy?!"

"Wrong," I answered promptly.

"He seems to disagree."

"Huh? My Guy! You *meanie*! I thought we were friends!"

Uh, nope. We're not friends. Just lunch buddies.

"I'm sorry Steyn gave you a hard time—he didn't do anything inappropriate, I hope? He may not look it, but he's not a bad app—" Derek suddenly lowered a thoughtful eyebrow and stopped midsentence. Then he cleared his throat. "Ahh… Please accept my apology in his place."

He *was* a bad apple. That was Steyn, bad apple extraordinaire.

"*Hey!* You're supposed to say I'm *not* a bad apple! Defend my good name in front of my Guy!"

"Quite all right, my lord! You needn't apologize to the likes of me, my lord!" I snapped to attention.

"Lord Derek, my Guy, aren't ya both ignoring me?"

"Anyway…you're welcome to join us if you wish," Derek offered.

"Yes, please!"

"Excuse me, miss…" Derek sat in an empty chair and gave the waitress his order with surreal expertise. The waitress's face sparkled. Just look at that smile! A smile she would never direct at myself or Steyn. This was facial discrimination, pure and simple.

But all that aside, from his clothing to everything else, he looked really good—I'm talking about Derek, of course. He couldn't help being born with a handsome face, but he didn't exactly look like the son of a duke. Derek blended in perfectly with the humble eatery.

Is he "incognito"? Or on a secret mission for his house?

This eatery was in a part of town the nobility never graced, and most common capital dwellers couldn't recognize any of the nobility by face, no matter how important they were. So nobody would even think the son of a duke would be here—then again, I doubt Derek was expecting a peasant like me to be eating with Steyn, either.

Is it okay for me to keep sitting here? Seriously, is it?

Derek's food arrived. The waitress shyly set an additional saucer next to Derek, saying it was on the house. But it was clearly on her. On *her*.

"Why, thanks. That's so kind." Derek smiled back.

"Have a lovely meal!" The waitress blushed and bounded back into the kitchen.

Steyn sighed broodingly. "And another scheming girl falls victim to the venomous bite beneath Lord Derek's polite mask."

"Scheming"? Come on, at least call her innocent.

"Would you rather I shun her? That would only make things awkward. If a handsome face means good treatment, I say make the most out of it."

His sweet smile to the waitress long gone, Derek muttered a prayer to the Sky God and began to eat. Even the way he ate was quite peasantlike, though not unrefined. And he didn't ask a word about who I was! I formulated a theory in my mind and glanced at Steyn to see if I was right… A son of a duke might have a body double. Was this guy just Derek's look-alike?

"Oh…so he's a body double. C'mon, Steyn, you should've said so sooner."

"Um, but that's the real Lord Derek."

Ridiculous.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I'm real."

Great! Now you've made the son of a duke apologize to you!

"He thinks you're a body double… You're a real hoot, my Guy! Serves you right for eating like a slob, Lord Derek."

Derek answered grumpily, "My stomach's upset; I had to eat something gross. It was either a truth serum or a hallucinogenic, I think? I wish it had been poison—that tastes better."

"Well yeah, poison is engineered to taste good so you won't spit it out right away."

"Then drugs need to be engineered to taste better, too. Scientists need to work harder."

Um…no they don't, Lord Derek. You guys are scaring me!

Where and what were you even eating, Lord Derek?!

I grabbed my glass and gulped down the rest of my sparkling water. Sparkling water was served from a spout in a giant barrel. Patrons could fill

their glasses as they pleased. “I’m going to refill my water.” I stood from my seat.

But then—

“Oh, I’ll get it. Drinks for everyone!”

God, nooo!

It was too late—Steyn had already mercilessly left with the glasses, leaving behind an awkward common soldier and the son of a duke. I knew him by name, but this was my first time meeting him. And I’m sure Derek wasn’t even aware of my existence before today.

The silence killing me, I gritted my teeth and started a conversation. “So, um, Lord Derek…I promise I will take our little meeting here today to the grave with me.”

“If you’re a friend of Steyn’s, you’re no threat to me. Neither are you a fool. Though I’m a bit reluctant, I’ll trust you all the same. Don’t worry, I won’t do anything to you.”

This made me rethink my terrible opinion of Steyn just a little.

“If anything, I’m a bit curious as to why Steyn arranged for you and me to meet.” Derek ripped his dark bread apart and carelessly shoved it in his mouth. “Any ideas why?”

Let me think… I’m just a normal common-born soldier. I’m not worthy of a formal introduction to Lord Derek. Which then means—

“Maybe it’s because…oddly enough, Steyn sees me as a friend?”

That had to be it. I doubt he’d come to my rescue unless my assailant had a pretty face. And I had the feeling Steyn was someone you didn’t want on your bad side…

“Aha…” For some reason, a deep sense of sympathy welled in Derek’s brown eyes. I could practically hear him saying, “*You’re a real trooper, buddy!*”

Why are you looking at me like that?!

Wait, now he’s looking away?

“I’m baaack. Sparkling waters have landed!”

Steyn returned to his seat with three sparkling waters in hand.

I was supposed to spend my day off relaxing…so why am I so exhausted? Probably because I met Derek. Yeah…it's mostly Steyn's fault.

But behind the terrifying conversation, it was clear that Derek was doing well. He gave off the impression that he just wanted to go to a peasant eatery for a relaxing meal…

I stood by the castle gate, looking up at the orange sky. A wreven proudly spread its wings and soared. At least it didn't poop on my shoe. But instead, a lone black feather came fluttering down. I picked it up and glared at it.

What's this…an omen from a wreven?

As I returned to the barracks, a shadow of anxiety looming over me, I found the platoon leader waiting for me. He was in charge of rookie soldiers like me who were yet to be assigned posts. He had a stern face and was the third son of a lowly nobleman. His lover was also a civil servant. They were childhood friends, and after years of the will-they-won't-they dance, they finally got together.

My superior officers described his lover as a good cook with a pretty smile. But I had the unfortunate label of being *that* guy who, when he heard them talking, said, *"He has a girlfriend? That must be nice!"* and made the room so tense and quiet that you could hear a pin drop. I remember my platoon leader smiled uncomfortably when I said that… It was a strange memory.

"Welcome back, Guy. How was your day off?"

"Very good, sir!"

"Glad to hear it. I have a message for you. There's been an alteration to your schedule tomorrow."

"An alteration, sir?"

Change in patrol route? Or am I getting more training?

"Prince Sirius and Princess Octavia will be conducting a survey in the castle town."

"Both of them…?"

Why both of them together? And why this time of year? Had they…*ever* gone out together? What in the world brought this on?

"Princess Octavia was originally supposed to conduct the survey. She wished to resume her public appearances, so Prince Sirius decided to accommodate her."

"So…they're conducting a joint survey?"

My platoon leader nodded. “Prince Sirius is personally escorting a special security team to ensure her safety.”

I’m sure the security team is packed with a bunch of Sirius’s fans.

“But Princess Octavia… She had a special request.”

Uh-oh. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

“Since all the soldiers Prince Sirius chose are men she doesn’t know, she wishes to include some soldiers she knows in the guard.”

That bad feeling’s getting worse.

“And the name Guy Peutz came up on the list. You’re a rookie; many voiced their concerns over it. But Prince Sirius gave his approval.”

I felt like I was going to faint.

“So, Guy, you are tasked with joining the security team for their survey. Godspeed.”

“Yes, sir…!”

I was a castle soldier. My answer must be unwavering and alert. It was the only choice I had.

59

I woke up early and changed into my survey outfit! Luckily, last night I didn’t have any of those weird self-doubting kind of creepy dreams. Real talk, that nightmare was influenced by something completely different from the dream of that shitty, haunting memory… And when I’d woken up crying from it, I blamed it on the nightmare—but for some reason, that idea didn’t feel right to me. Hmmm…

“Here, Your Highness,” Sasha said, handing me the tiara from the accessories tray. I got to see the tiara adorned with living flowers for the first time. At first, I thought of just keeping it simple with Lieche orchids, but since we would be going out into the castle town on survey, I decided to go with some seasonal flowers beloved by the castle town inhabitants. So I hadn’t known until that very moment just which flowers would be in my tiara.

“Sakura…?” For the first time in a while, a Japanese word slipped out of my mouth.

Sasha had prepared a crown of rosy blossoms for my tiara. They came from a blooming tree that was called kallum in this world, but it resembled sakura. The difference was the season in which they bloomed. Kallums bloomed in the fall. The shape of the petals and the duration of their bloom was also kind of different. Kallums bloomed for about thirty days, and the tips of the petals were slashed in two.

"Your Highness…?" Sasha asked timidly.

Oops. Wrong reaction.

"Kallum blooms, I see. Quite lovely."

And they were lovely. But if I had seen them just a few days earlier, I might have been even more shaken up by the sight of them. I had a special personal attachment to kallum blossoms…a resentful feeling, you might say… We shared a dark past.

In times when the kallums were in full bloom, if I stared at the blossoms and ignored everything else, I could feel like I was in Japan again. If I just closed my eyes…the next time I opened them, I would be home again—

I'm ashamed to admit it, but when I was a child, I entertained that fantasy more times than I could count!

But whenever I did open my eyes, I would see kallum blooms, not sakura. And I would still be Octavia. And it all just made me feel that much emptier inside. It was a total bummer.

So whenever it was kallum blossom season, I tried to avoid looking at them. Luckily, no kallum trees grew at the castle. The only places they did bloom near me…were the rows of kallum in the castle town and the kallum tree at Duke Nightfellow's manor.

"These kallum blooms are going to have a moment in the spotlight when the survey begins."

Every time a princess attended a survey, immediately upon her arrival in the castle town, one of the castle town residents always gave her a bouquet of flowers. The bouquet was actually prepared by castle staff and given to the peasant to give to the princess—it was all staged.

But this time, since I was going to wear living flowers in my hair, we were going to have my tiara serve as the bouquet. So I was excited to have a peasant put flowers in my hair!

"I shall take this to the carriage, my lady." Sasha elegantly bowed with the tray of accessories.

“Thank you.”

Okay, now I just have to meet at the castle gate where Sirius is, then get in the carriage and go to the castle town! I’ll just give myself a final once-over before I leave the dressing room…

Then there was a knock at the door. Matilda went to answer, and I could see Hugh through the crack. The dressing room was off-limits for men, you see!

After a brief exchange with Hugh, Matilda turned back to me and said, “Your Highness, Sir Roberts has brought the soldiers you requested attend today’s survey.”

“Oh, did he? Well, I’ve been expecting them.”

Guy and Heller, those were the two men I’d requested. I figured it would be a good idea to have a little meet and greet before we left, so I’m glad that I pushed Hugh hard—*really* hard—to get them here! Of course, I needed Sirius’s permission, but I guess we got that?

“Your Highness—”

Hugh was first to enter. He was dressed immaculately in the guard’s uniform. Except…he wasn’t wearing the sword tassel from Sirius—the one that was really short.

“Hugh, where is your golden tassel?”

There was an ordinary tassel on his sword hilt instead.

“I will be on duty as your personal bodyguard today, Princess Octavia. And the golden tassel signifies my allegiance to Prince Sirius.”

D-dude, isn’t that a bit extreme? I mean, I read the whole golden tassel arc in the books. Oh! I think I know…

“Did my brother command it?”

“No, my lady.”

Swing and a miss. I guess that thing I said earlier struck a nerve?

“I don’t mind if you switch it out with a golden tassel.”

“I appreciate your kindness, Princess; however, you needn’t concern yourself. I did this…as a matter of principle.”

As adamant as he was, I could tell he would not be coerced into changing his tassel.

After letting my silence sit for a moment, Hugh nodded at the door. Guy Peutz, then Heller Byrne entered the room. They were both soldiers, but we

had them attired in guardsman uniforms. And today, they would be guardsmen—accompanying Hugh as he guarded me.

Guy was…obviously freaking out! This was particularly evident in the way he stared hard at me at first, then gasped and avoided my gaze. *Yeah… that checks out. I feel ya, Guy, I feel ya so hard I could shake your hand. We're kindred spirits! I'm just a former Japanese high school student on the inside. Under normal circumstances, Guy and I would be pals! I dunno why, but I'm suddenly dying to call him my-Guy! No, wait, he's older than me, right? It would be rude to give him a silly nickname…! But maybe he can be my-Guy in my heart…*

"Guy Peutz, thank you for agreeing to be my bodyguard. I'll be counting on you today. It is most reassuring to have someone Alec trusts beside me."

And while we're at it, please be my emotional support friend!

"I—I am deeply humbled, Princess! I shall carry out my duty with all my body and soul!"

While I was busy vibing with feelings of friendship, Guy seemed to be freaking out even harder.

Bodyguard to a princess has got to be a heavy assignment… Yeah, it definitely is. And it was super-short notice, besides. Sorry, bestie, but I can't let you go!

Shaking off my guilty conscience, I turned to speak to Heller. "Heller Byrne, you have my thanks as well. Do you recall what happened the other day at the training grounds?"

"Yes, Princess…!"

There were dark circles under Heller's eyes. Way to ruin his blue-eyed, blond-haired beauty. But he didn't look a thing like Rust.

"Is your brother well?"

Gimme dat Rust intel!

Heller stiffened like a statue for a moment. Then his eyes swam all over the place as he answered, "M-my brother…said he would like to see you again soon."

Hmmm… So Rust asked Heller to deliver a message, eh? See me again soon, he said… But when is "soon"? When is it? Like, today? Am I way off?

But I couldn't ask Heller any further questions then and there, or he'd get suspicious.

“I see. Very well.”

I smiled sweetly, a wholehearted Princess Smile! Yet both my-Guy and Heller tensed up. *Well…I won’t accept that!*

“Heller, I have high hopes for you.”

Particularly in your ability to bring me Rust intel!

“Your Highness, it’s time…” Matilda spoke quietly.

“Ah yes. We mustn’t be late to the survey.”

Never be late to roll call, kids!

Once out in the hallway, I happened to spot a familiar face approaching from the other direction. “Lord Sil!” It was Sil and Nathan, who had been assigned to surveil him. I heard Sirius had quite the hard time choosing Sil’s watcher. Ordinarily, it would have been Hugh, but since he was guarding me, and Nathan had expressed personal interest, he was assigned to Sil.

“Princess Octavia!” Sil ran over to me with a smile. “Thank goodness I caught you. I wanted to see you before you left for the survey…”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have.”

I got astonished stares from Guy and Heller, but I let it fly. Was it really that weird for me and Sil to smile and talk to each other?

“Shouldn’t you concern yourself with my brother and not me?”

“Well…I spoke with Sirius earlier.” There was a trace of discomfort in his eyes.

“Did you two quarrel?”

“Not exactly…but there was a difference of opinion.” Sil heaved a long sigh.

“Seriously, what’s that asshole’s problem?”—that was the vibe Sil was giving off. So courageous! But even in the books, he’d get like this now and then whenever Sirius was involved.

“Princess Octavia.” Sil suddenly faced me head-on, his eyes gravely serious. “I love Sirius with all my heart.”

Huh? Why’re you telling me that? If you said those words to Sirius, he’d die from happiness.

“I am aware of that, yes.”

“But no matter how much I love him, I can’t always take his side. Sirius makes mistakes sometimes, and probably, so do I. That’s why…”

I looked up at Sil. I always forget he is taller than me.

“Princess Octavia, I want you to unabashedly do whatever you think is right.”

“I’m on your side…” That’s how his declaration could be interpreted. If Sirius heard him say that…well, then that would certainly be the case! But he sought me out to tell me the way he did for a reason. It sounded like he was talking about Klifford’s false charges…but I got the sense he was hinting at the heir dilemma as well.

“I pray you have a successful survey.”

Sil knew it wasn’t an ordinary survey. And judging by what he just said—he was hoping Klifford’s innocence was proven and that the true criminal was caught, of course! Copy that, Lord Sil!

“Yes, I promise it will be a success.”

Sil and I smiled at each other.

We stood at the main gate to the royal castle.

Sirius was waiting for me near a carriage drawn by a team of six horses. With the sunlight glittering behind him, his ikemen splendor was shimmering so hard that it pissed me off a little. He was clothed mainly in white as usual, but he was dressed up in the survey deluxe edition. If I had to say, it had a sort of military motif to it. He was also armed with a sword. I guess he picked that look because he was supposed to be a concerned brother accompanying his baby sister for her protection on her public royal duties.

And a bit of a distance away from Sirius were his bodyguards, surrounding the carriage. I spotted Klifford among them. When our eyes met, he bowed ever so faintly to me. He was wearing the guardsman’s uniform—with a golden tassel on his sword hilt. He was to join the survey as one of Sirius’s bodyguards.

Just like Hugh’s tassel, they were just props for the roles they had to play. But only for today.

I slowly walked over to the front of carriage, where Sirius was waiting. I flapped Blackfeather open and said, “Good day, Brother. Your uniform is most becoming.” Staring at him up close, I was almost overpowered by his ikemen splendor (even though now wasn’t the time or place).

“For today, think of me as one of the bodyguards protecting you. You are the star of the show.”

“Oh my… I hope I’m dressed adequately for the part. What do you think?” I inquired.

I say this modestly, of course! But everyone did their best with my makeup and attire, so I looked *perfect*! You can quote me on that!

Sirius just stared blankly at me, like the question was unexpected. His long lashes fluttered in confusion. Then he looked me over critically.

“……”

Several seconds passed. *C-c’mon, you don’t have to think about it that hard.*

“You look—”

I look?

“You look nice… That color suits you very well.”

Whoa—he gave me an honest compliment! I’m kinda blushing. He even made eye contact when he said that!

“I am pleased that you approve, Brother.” I lifted Blackfeather to hide my pink cheeks.

Then silence fell between us. It was like we were seeing who would make the first move?

“Octavia.” Sirius made the first move. “Your hand—” He reached his hand out to me, to help me into the carriage. My gaze fell to his large hand. Then the next thing I knew, my body was trembling with excitement.

Because once I took his hand…it would all begin.

This would be different from the junior ball. This time, I would be the bait to lure the traitors *by my own will*. But my true objective was elsewhere.

To me, this was a battle—a battle to clear Klifford’s false charges.

Sirius and I were working together since we shared the objective of catching the traitors, but our feelings on Klifford were in stark contrast. Sirius saw him as the enemy.

I have to put my life on the line.

I lifted my gaze, steeled my resolve, and looked at Sirius’s chiseled face. He stared silently back at me. But from the fire burning in his aquamarine eyes, I could tell he still thought Klifford was behind Sil’s incident.

I closed Blackfeather and shifted it to my gloved left hand. Even though I changed its dressing daily, I still felt a little pain whenever I moved it. But I hid it with a smile and rested my right hand in Sirius's.

"Well, this *is* our first survey together. I'm terribly excited."

Sirius lightly gripped my hand. "Likewise. I've been waiting for this day to come."

"And I fully intend to make it a good day."

And prove Klifford's innocence!

I think he understood what I was trying to say.

"I'm sure you will." He let the defiant fire in his eyes blaze unhidden. "As will I."

I'm sure we had different ideas of what a "good day" meant. But despite our conversation, he helped me into the carriage with impeccable grace.

We were both in the carriage. Everything was ready—and at last, he gave the signal.

"We depart!"

And with that, the team of six horses pulled the eye-catching royal carriage off to the castle town.

It was a trap…with my brother and me inside as bait.

The World Through the Emissary of Ongarne's Eyes: Part 6

He had an awareness that this was a ridiculous dream.

He was baffled to no end as to why he dreamed of the past sometimes. What happened, how he moved—he remembered everything clearly. And he could never change anything about it, not that he particularly wanted to.

He untangled the ropes that bound him, crawled out of the lake he had been thrown into, and reached the shore. Then the man stepped on his hand.

He stabbed his dagger into the man's foot—he killed everyone.

It wasn't at all difficult. If he accepted it, he knew exactly how to do it. It was just like breathing.

And then, exactly as it had been in reality, the young boy survived.

He thought nothing of it.

Klifford…

But then, a change that couldn't have possibly happened.

An intruder…in the dream.

Who's there?

Then the change affected him, too.

He was supposed to just sit and stare, but the voice moved him.

Then he found its owner.

Octavia. The girl who became his Sovereign.

"Your Highness?"

As soon as he called out to her, the scenery evolved. Darkness swallowed him. He assumed he was waking up. But…no matter how long he sat still and waited, there were no signs of his consciousness returning.

Instead, the scenery changed. His hand floated down to his sword.

He sensed no danger.

It was a deflating feeling.

Klifford released his sword.

Scenery the likes of which he had never seen spread before his eyes. He had seen trees like those in the past, but a different species. As their rosy

blossoms danced around him, he noticed many groups of people making merry beneath them. But only a few of them were in the light.

There were four of them. A family, perhaps. The similar shape of their faces suggested a blood connection. They all had black hair and black eyes. Their attire was odd but practical.

They were a grown man and woman with two young girls—sisters.

“I mean, we’re too old to go on Hanami picnics with our parents.” A girl of fifteen or sixteen grumbled as she flopped onto a blue cloth spread on the ground. Atop the cloth was a spread of dishes. The food was abundant but not luxurious.

“C’mon, Maki, you know Dad’s been looking forward to this,” the girl’s elder sister rebuked her.

“Ohhh, Makiii! Come to Daddyyy!”

“Ew! Dad, you smell like beer! Don’t touch me!”

Klifford watched the girl with amusement as she shrank away from her father. Despite her complaining, she clearly liked the man.

But was this *his* dream?

The language they were speaking didn’t sound like any language he’d ever heard, but somehow he understood it. No, he had heard it before—it had the same ring to it as the words she and the youngest prince chanted when he’d departed on his mission.

Klifford approached the family. They didn’t seem to be aware of him.

After observing them for a while, Klifford noticed something about the girl called Maki—even though her facial features were completely different, she resembled Octavia. Her mannerisms, her girlish facial expressions—Octavia inhabited them.

But they were entirely different. This girl was far too carefree compared to Octavia. There was something else… Perhaps it’s because she was interacting with her father and sister—but there were no walls around her heart.

“Mom! Make Dad stop!”

With her mother as well, the girl let her emotions carry her, and she sought comfort from her mother.

There were far too many oddities. The location, the blossoming trees, the buildings and shapes in the distance. They appeared to have evolved from a fundamentally different culture.

But this was likely the sort of scene that also existed in Klifford's world. A scene of mundane family bliss.

The sight was incompatible with him.

This was a dream—there was no mistaking that. But there was no way it could be *his* dream.

There was only one possibility.

"My Insignia…"

Even when he voiced the words, nobody picked up on his presence.

It was the Insignia connection. There was a phenomenon that occurred infrequently when a Sovereign-Adjutant bond was deep, and their Insignia was strengthened: Their souls linked. Sometimes they linked simultaneously, sometimes they linked at staggered times. The veracity of this phenomenon was unknown, but sometimes, whether they wished it or not, the linked souls would reveal to each other what they would rather keep hidden.

Consequently, this phenomenon didn't occur simply by forging a Sovereign-Adjutant bond. Not even if the Adjutant strengthened his Insignia to protect his Sovereign.

Klifford could not make sense of how or why this was happening to them.

That was because he considered the phenomenon so impossible that it was pointless to commit it to memory.

But this Octavia in his dream was surely genuine.

Which must mean, this dream was…

…Octavia's dream?

Even though Octavia was not there?

"Fine! I'm gonna go hang out with my friends!"

In a huff, the girl left her family. Immediately after, their previously discernable faces began to melt.

By the time the girl ran back to them, her family was nowhere to be found.

Only the blossoms fluttered onto the empty ground where they once were.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me. Dad…Mom…Sis…where are you?"

In silence, Klifford took a step closer to the girl. A pure impulse.

Then the scenery changed.

The black-haired girl called Maki was now young. Octavia’s silhouette blurred with hers.

Looming above the girl was a tree quite similar to the trees in the previous scene.

“You look just like a sakura… Too bad you’re not. I was so happy to find you.” The girl ardently gazed up at the blooming tree and muttered.

She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her fists.

After a long pause, during which the girl was in prayer, she opened her eyes.

A moment of silence, then the girl’s fists unraveled.

“I guess, when I open my eyes…I won’t find out this was all a horrible dream.”

The girl stood lifelessly to the spot.

“Why did you have to look so alike…? Way to get my hopes up.”

Defeated, the girl’s silhouette wavered. The two superimposed silhouettes became one. The girl with the black hair completely melted into little Octavia, his Sovereign.

No mistaking it. This was Octavia’s dream. He, the Adjutant, was linked to his Sovereign.

“I miss you so much…”

As Octavia muttered, she slowly faded away.

He would wake from the dream soon.

Klifford kneeled beside little Octavia.

“Your Highness—my Sovereign.”

Her light aquamarine eyes reflected Klifford.

“You have no need to hold in your tears. This is a dream.”

“A dream…”

Just as he dreamed of his past, this was surely Octavia’s past.

In the past, when Octavia was here, she probably did not cry.

“Even in your dreams, your command holds true.”

If she cried, he would hide her tears from everyone—even from Octavia herself. This was a dream it would be best for Octavia to forget.

“Klifford…”

Tears spilled from Octavia’s eyes.

He woke in a dimly lit cell. His arms were raised in the same position as they had been in the dream.

He was reaching up to wipe away Octavia’s tears.

But Klifford’s consciousness snapped back to reality.

A human presence was approaching him. From his supine position, he turned his gaze toward it.

It was Esfia’s eldest prince, the one he would serve as bodyguard.

“Get up, Klifford Alderton.”

—Fin.

Afterword

And that was *The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices*, Vol. 4! Thank you very much for reading it! Hi, I'm Mamecyoro.

I must apologize for my long absence since Volume 3.

But at long last, we get to plunge into Volume 4.

With the junior ball over, we finally think we get a moment's peace—then Octavia is faced with a new problem. And she's put in a situation where she can't easily meet with her bodyguard, Klifford. What ever will she do? That's the story.

By the way, this is an isekai fantasy with a female protagonist! It's also a romance! Also a comedy! That's what I'm going for, at least. In other words, it's a romcom.

Rom…com? you may be asking yourself, but yes, it's a romcom.

The series is also a manga (drawn by Kazusa Yoneda and serialized on ComicWalker, etc.—Volumes 1 through 4 are now on sale to rave reviews). My supervising role lets me check over a lot of the scenes beforehand, and when I was writing the background on how Klifford's neck scar came about, the thought hit me again: *Oh, crap…this guy doesn't belong in a romcom.*

Methinks that ship hath sailed long ago.

Indeed, of all the main male characters in *The Princess of Convenient Plot Devices*, Klifford is the furthest from a romcom lead you can get. So who's the closest, you might ask? Guy…?

But then I had an epiphany.

"No, see, *that's* what makes him naive. You know, because he's got no romantic experience!"

If all the plot points line up just the way I want them to, he'll play a critical role, I promise. A bunch of things are going to pile up. But if the plot points are hard to see and if I miss the target, he'll probably fall off the correct story arc…

Hmm…well, I can't deny that he's still a far cry from a romcom hero. But I'll be damned if I don't make him one.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my editor for helping me so much with Volume 4's publication. To my proofreader, designer, and everyone else who had a hand in Volume 4, and to everyone who got their hands on a copy, I thank you.

I also need to take a moment to thank my illustrator, Fuji for the always wonderful cover art and illustrations. I'm in love with how lifelike and valiant Octavia is.

Volume 4 ended on a *To be continued.*.. note, so I hope you won't have to wait long for this arc's conclusion, Volume 5, to come out!

I'll try my hardest not to become the boy who cried wolf.

Mamecyoro

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